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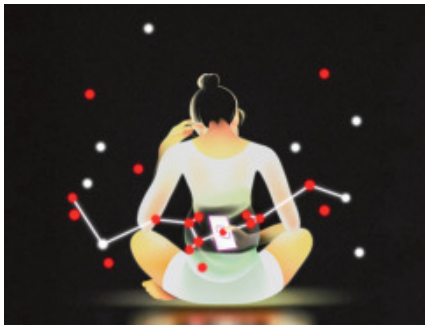

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Jia Tolentino writes about data privacy and trying to hide her pregnancy from her smartphone.

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Dan Kaufman on the high-stakes race for Joe Manchin's Senate seat and the politics of coal country.

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LEFT: ARD SU; RIGHT: REBECCA KIGER

THE MAIL

THE COURT'S DISTINCTION

Louis Menand, in his helpful review of the retired Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer's new book, claims that "what makes the Court different from other political actors is stare decisis"—that is, its tradition of respecting earlier decisions (Books, April 15th). But several other parts of the government often do the same thing; what lawyers call stare decisis is merely a formalization of a natural tendency in organizational decision-making.

What truly distinguishes the Supreme Court from most other political institutions is something that Menand does not mention: life tenure. Life tenure enables the Justices to take the long view far more than is possible for a President or a member of Congress. (Some government agencies—the Navy, for example—are forced by their mission to make longer-term plans, but they are subject to direct political control in a way that the Supreme Court is not.) The Court's long view was nicely illustrated in its recent decision on whether the Fourteenth Amendment barred Donald Trump from the national ballot. If you were to look only at the language of the amendment—and especially if you allowed partisan bias to affect your judgment—it would be easy to see Colorado's decision as unassailable. Yet all nine Justices disagreed. To their credit, none of the liberal Justices seized on the case as an opportunity to send a message to the country that an insurrectionist must not be allowed to become President. Instead, they agreed with the conservatives that such a decision might create chaos in elections that will be held long after Trump is history.

Jack Harllee
Washington, D.C.

WASTED CHANCES

Eric Lach's article about Jessica Tisch, New York City's sanitation commissioner, shows clearly that Tisch doesn't care about reducing waste—only about hiding it ("Trash, Trash Revolution," April 15th). That is a shame, given that the city's waste-containerization program came about through discussions about zero-waste goals.

Between 2016 and 2017, I led a series of talks at the Center for Architecture, in New York; among the participants were members of the Department of Sanitation. These talks produced a set of guidelines for how the city could reduce waste while improving operations and streetscapes. (I was briefly quoted in Lach's piece.) Waste containerization, done right, should incentivize waste reduction and the separation of recyclable and compostable waste, thus helping the city meet its climate goals and improve residents' quality of life. It is a pity that Eric Adams's administration has not taken an approach that prioritizes these aims. What we need is a holistic design solution; Tisch's plan will just lead to sidewalks lined with small bins, and streets lined with large ones.

Clare Miflin
Executive Director
Center for Zero Waste Design
Brooklyn, N.Y.

I found the last sentences of Lach's profile to be very troubling. Tisch "didn't think it was her job to reduce garbage—just to remove it." This attitude displays the carelessness of privileged individuals like Tisch—who, Lach notes, is an heiress from an extremely wealthy family—who can afford to live far away from landfills and incinerators. It also shows why Americans lead the way in consuming resources for our convenience, blithely exporting the end products to other states and countries. A genuine reckoning with trash should require us to reduce our output. Under Tisch, wastescapes that resemble the maligned Fresh Kills landfill grow every day. These mountains of trash will be part of the record that we leave behind for future generations to ponder.

Heidi Scott
University Park, Md.

•

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GOINGS ON

MAY 8 - 14, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

In the nineteen-seventies, as the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's filmmaker-in-residence, Charles Atlas revolutionized the way that dance was presented in cinema. He went on to make his own movies—featuring performers and dance-world stars such as Lady Bunny, Karole Armitage, Michael Clark, and Leigh Bowery (pictured, in "Hail the New Puritan," from 1986). Anthology Film Archives presents a retrospective, **"Atlas Variations: The Moving-Image Work of Charles Atlas"** (May 8-June 27), which captures the energy of the times—when Atlas's joy, generosity, and true vision gave one the feeling that all things, artistically speaking, were possible.—*Hilton Als*

COURTESY ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX

ABOUT TOWN

BROADWAY | "If there are any humans left on Earth in a hundred years," the doctor Astrov (William Jackson Harper) tells the sad-sack Vanya (Steve Carell), "they're going to hate us for having lived such stupid, selfish lives." A hundred and twenty-five years since the première of Chekhov's **"Uncle Vanya,"** we're too absorbed in our own self-hatred and rivalries to spare much resentment for our great-grandparents' life style. Conveniently, Lila Neugebauer's staging and Heidi Schreck's colloquial "translation/adaptation" modernize the original, emphasizing the themes of deforestation and species extinction, which parallel the wrongs that Vanya's squabbling family perpetrate on one another. Surfacing the comedy and tragedy of daily life is the work of any Chekhov production; here, most of the star-studded cast—including Alfred Molina and Alison Pill—finds the comedy. Carell, aided by Schreck's script, manages both.—*Dan Stahl (Vivian Beaumont; through June 16.)*

DANCE | The "Seven New Dances" concert that Paul Taylor presented at the 92nd Street Y in 1957 is one of the most infamous events in modern-dance history. It was packed with avant-garde experiments—postures taken from people in the street, long expanses of stillness, sounds that only John Cage was classifying as music—and it received such responses as an exodus of audience members and a review composed of blank space. **Paul Taylor Dance Company,** to honor the Y's hundred and fiftieth anniversary, returns to re-create part of the program, with the addition of Alan Cumming reciting droll recollections by Taylor about the incident and what it taught him. Taylor's popular "Esplanade" serves as a hedge.—*Brian Seibert (92NY; May 12.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | Throughout May, a parade of superstar pianists bring several lively programs to Carnegie Hall. The famously theatrical **Yuja Wang** leads off with a recital (May 10) that combines mid-century mysticism (Scriabin's Sonata No. 8, two of Messiaen's "Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus") with the technicolor odysseys of Chopin's four Ballades, throwing in Debussy's "L'isle joyeuse" for fun. A week later, **Seong-Jin Cho** pairs Haydn's pearlescent Sonata in E Minor with two Ravel pieces (including "Le tombeau de Couperin") that play on the Baroque. **Evgeny Kissin's** program (May 24 and May 29) tours through Brahms's own set of four Ballades, along with sonatas by Beethoven and Prokofiev. Finally, on May 31, **Mitsuko Uchida** joins the Philadelphia Orchestra as it performs Ravel's G-major piano concerto, Debussy's "La mer," and a new piece by Valerie Coleman.—*Fergus McIntosh (Carnegie Hall; May 10-31.)*

INDIE ROCK | When, in 2012, the members of the Canadian indie-rock band Women scattered to pursue other projects, the guitarist and lead singer Patrick Flegel found refuge in the drag persona **Cindy Lee,** performing what they call "confrontational pop." In the twenty-tens, an experimental series of self-released lo-fi cassettes culminated in the wraithlike album "What's Tonight to Eternity?," which was longlisted for the Polaris Prize. Cindy Lee's new album, "Diamond Jubilee," is even harder to access: a thirty-two-song double disk was issued primarily as a download on a Lee's Geocities Web site. The record feels like another confrontation, an exhaustive little guitar world deliberately tucked away in a forgotten corner of the Internet, unearthed only for shows like this one.—*Sheldon Pearce (TV Eye; May 14.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Abe Koogler's comedy about a reality-bending restaurant, **"Staff Meal,"** is the theatrical equivalent of the chaos menu. The appetizer course is a meet-cute (Susannah Flood and Greg Keller play singles on a trippy night out) and a meta-theatrical farce (beware the audience member near you, especially if she's Stephanie Berry); the entrée is an allegory about the theatre's dwindling ability to support strange art (waiters discuss the vanishing clientele); and dessert is a metaphysical thriller in which one fantastical figure turns out to be another fantastical figure in disguise. Morgan Green's hallucinatory production relies heavily on the gonzo performer Erin Markey, as a shadowy vagrant who is also, somehow, the restaurant's faceless backer. Koogler is thinking about the way that theatre relies—so dangerously!—on its capricious funders: "It's vagrants," the vagrant says, "all the way down."—*Helen Shaw (Playwrights Horizons; through May 19.)*

MOVIES | The intensity of Joanna Arnow's first feature, **"The Feeling That the Time for Doing Something Has Passed,"** is sharpened by the precision of her writing and her direction. She also stars as Ann, a thirtysomething Brooklynite who seeks to be sexually dominated by men. She endures humiliations in her tech-world job and in her relationship with her parents, and her search for submission in the bedroom comes off as an exploration of emotional endurance. One man is too wild, one is too mild, and another, who plays the game right, is as cold as ice. Arnow invests the role with uninhibited physical candor, enacting the men's orders with a devotion that's virtually dancelike, in the vein of Pina Bausch; lacerating dialogue and delicately poised images raise Ann's struggles to a poignant, awkward state of grace.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

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TABLES FOR TWO

The Bagel Renaissance

Cities across America have long been home to flaccid facsimiles of New York-style bagel shops, but lately they've been joined by a new breed: businesses undertaken by ambitious, savvy young people seeking to make the bagel their own. See L.A.'s Courage, with rustic, crusty bagels arranged in photogenic open-faced sandwiches; Miami's El Bagel, serving one layered with guava marmalade, cream cheese, and a fried egg; and New Orleans's Flour Moon Bagels, which offers bagel "tartines" (plus, sometimes, a crawfish-stuffed bialy)—every city seems to have its own new-wave status bagel.

You could argue that the nationwide bagel revival has been a boon to New York's own scene; lately, the city has been home to a growing roster of indie bagel-makers. On a recent Saturday morning, I picked up a half-dozen sourdough bagels and a tub of burnt-scallion cream cheese from Wheated Brooklyn, a pizza restaurant just south of Prospect Park. Earlier this spring, the people behind Leo, a pizza place in Williamsburg, opened Apollo Bagels, in the East Village, which serves its sourdough product open-faced and meticulously assembled. The Mud Club, a wood-fired bagel, pizza, and tapas restaurant and dance club in the Hudson Valley, has popped up on the Lower East Side, where, the other day, I ordered a bacon, egg, and cheese, oozing aioli and roasted-jalapeño-and-tomato jam, on a dense and crusty everything bagel. (They'll soon open a permanent outpost here.)

The newcomer that best fits my vision of bagel as humble staple is Adam Goldberg's PopUp Bagels, with locations in Connecticut and in select tony precincts (Greenwich Village, Palm Beach, Wellesley, Mass.). A PopUp bagel is a bit less dense than the most traditional New York bagels; Goldberg wanted to make them light enough that you could comfortably eat more than one. In other ways, a PopUp bagel seems archetypal: small, chewy, with a crisp golden-brown crust—urbane, and almost chic, in its restraint.

Utopia, in Whitestone, Queens, open since 1981, sates both traditionalist tastes and the Internet's appetite for absurd viral foods. Here, they hand-roll the bagels, boil them in enormous kettles, and then bake them in a carrousel oven made in 1947. They've got all the essential flavors, including pumpernickel—a favorite of mine, and rare these days—but also sourdough, rainbow, piña colada, and jalapeño-cheddar. As if to provoke the snobs who complain about ballooning bagel sizes, they also sell a ten-pound "party style bagel wheel." The gigantic everything bagel I ordered the other day was completely raw in the center. But I'd also ordered a party-style pizza bagel—a sesame ten-pounder sliced in half, scooped, and layered with marinara sauce, mozzarella, and chopped chicken cutlet. It was outrageous yet comfortingly familiar and, dare I say, spectacular.

—Hannah Goldfield

PICK THREE

The writer Gary Shteyngart on three of the best Martinis in town.

1. My writer friend Amor Towles's favorite Martini in the city is found at the sumptuous Lobby Bar in the Chelsea, which was once a semi-seedy artist's paradise and now is not. The Martini there is beloved because it pays homage to the **Dukes Martini,** named for the eponymous London bar and hotel. To a rather enormous, frozen glass a server performs the "vermouth rinse," tossing away the vermouth before cold gin or vodka, primed with salt water, is poured. The alcohol is neither shaken nor stirred, creating a ninety-five-per-cent-undiluted Martini, which, at this volume, functions as a kind of uncontrolled insanity.

2. At the new outpost of the storied Dante, in the West Village, the eponymous **Dante Martini** is a heady combination of Ketel One, Fords Gin, Noilly Prat vermouth, grappa-esque Nardini Acqua di Cedro liqueur, and lemon and olive bitters. It's garnished with black, green, and red Cerignola olives, from Puglia. Dante's simple fluffy piece of bread with a side of smoked butter is one of the best Martini accompaniments I have had so far.

3. "E. B. White called the Martini the elixir of quietude," the food critic Adam Platt told me at Tigre, on the Lower East Side. The highlight of Tigre's Martini menu is the vodka-based **Cigarette,** which Platt immediately qualified as "smoky as fuck." Austria's Truman vodka is shot into flaming orbit by an inventive liquor made by Empirical, a Danish distillery, which presents on the tongue as a flavorful burst of smoked juniper, hence the feeling that a draw of nicotine and tar can't be far.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
FROM THE BIRDS

In December, 2021, a few weeks after the Omicron variant emerged to spark a new, punishing phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jim Lester's birds got sick. Lester, who owns an exhibition farm in Newfoundland, Canada, learned that the culprit wasn't the novel coronavirus but the first known outbreak in North America of a highly pathogenic strain of bird flu, called H5N1. Hundreds of birds were infected and died. Scores more—peacocks, geese, an emu—had to be culled. They all "had personalities," Lester said. "It was a true tragedy." Since then, the virus has propagated down through the Americas, killing tens of millions of birds and, perhaps more concerning, infecting dozens of mammalian species: bottlenose dolphins in Florida; sea lions in Peru; elephant seals on the islands near Antarctica. Now, for the first time, the virus is circulating among cattle, and at least thirty-four herds across nine states in this country are known to be infected. Last month, the Food and Drug Administration announced that one in every five samples of milk in the United States carries fragments of the virus, suggesting an even wider spread. One expert called the situation "totally unprecedented."

Influenza is a promiscuous pathogen. Its potential to unleash pandemics is due partly to the modular structure of its genome, which allows it to swap segments of its genetic material wholesale when different versions of the virus co-infect a cell. This occurred in the mid-nineties, when H5N1 was first isolated, from a goose in southern China, and went on to infect some twenty per cent of the poultry in Hong Kong markets, precipitating the slaughter of more than a million and a half chickens. In the intervening decades, the virus has periodically caused devastating outbreaks in poultry, but it remains poorly suited to the human respiratory tract, and that has limited its spread among people. Still, for those who do get infected—usually farmworkers and others with exposure to animals—the effects can be lethal. In some prior outbreaks, the virus inflicted a case-fatality rate of more than fifty per cent. Fortunately, only two people in the U.S. are known to have been infected, and both experienced mild symptoms. Since 2022, only about two dozen human cases have been recorded worldwide, and, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the risk to public health remains low.

The prevalence of the virus in our milk supply may also be less alarming than it sounds. The P.C.R. test used to identify it can detect minuscule amounts of genetic debris, and a positive result does not imply that the virus is alive, much less contagious. Nearly all milk sold in the U.S. is pasteurized—heated to destroy potential pathogens—and that process may be especially effective for unstable viruses such as influenza. (Many states—some, recently, as part of a broader backlash against public-health measures—have legalized the sale of raw milk, which health officials generally do not advise consuming.) The tests needed to conclusively determine whether pasteurization kills H5N1 take time and involve injecting eggs with milk samples, but, according to the F.D.A., preliminary studies haven't found any traces of live virus.

It now seems likely that H5N1 was first transmitted from a bird to a cow late last year, and that the virus has been circulating unchecked among cattle for months. Many cows who shed the virus don't show symptoms, and how it spreads among them remains a mystery. Contamination of milking equipment is the most probable route, but respiratory transmission is also a possibility. So far, pigs haven't contracted the virus, which is good for them—and us. Pigs have receptors for both avian and human versions of the flu, so they can serve as "mixing vessels," facilitating genetic exchange in ways that could spawn a mutant capable

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

of spreading among people and igniting another pandemic.

In the unlikely event of that emergency, we're far better positioned than we were for COVID. Influenza may be the world's most familiar viral pathogen—its genome, virulence, and transmission patterns have been studied for decades. The U.S. has a large stockpile of Tamiflu, which should work against bird flu, as it does for other influenza strains, and which could be given to an infected person's contacts to mitigate spread. Health officials have also indicated that they could rapidly scale up testing and, if needed, shift the nation's annual flu-vaccine production to shots that are tailored for H5N1.

But the ability to respond is not the same as responding. The country's initial approach has had an unsettling resonance with the first months of COVID. Because there is no widespread program to screen farm animals for H5N1, we have little sense of how many have been tested or what proportion of tests have been positive. It took a month after bird flu was detected in cattle for the Department of Agriculture to require that lactating cows be tested before crossing state lines, and the agency has since clarified that only thirty animals in a group must be tested, irrespective of how large the group is. Last month, when the government released genetic sequences for scientists to study, it did not share information about where or when the samples were collected, making it difficult to track how the virus is spreading and evolving. Meanwhile, we haven't conducted antibody studies of farmworkers that could determine the extent to which they are getting infected; we'll know they're sick if they show up in emergency rooms.

Many hospitals, of course, are still reeling from the pandemic, and leaders have expressed concern that they don't have the staffing, the resources, or the morale to contend with another crisis. The deeper problem, though, is the country's COVID hangover. America has emerged from the pandemic not just fatigued, but resentful and divided. If bird flu becomes human flu, one gets the sense that our principal fight won't be with the virus, but with one another.

In Albert Camus's novel "The Plague," the vectors of disease are not birds but rats. The authorities are slow to act and, as the death toll mounts, people grow depressed, distrustful, violent. Even when the crisis eventually recedes, a doctor comes to feel that plague "never dies or disappears for good." He notes, "Perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city." The rise of pandemic pathogens is an inextricable part of the modern world. The scale of their destruction doesn't have to be.

—Dhruv Khullar

THE ART WORLD

BANG

In an industrial building in Brooklyn last weekend, two men and a woman sat on folding chairs in a narrow, low-ceilinged room, blasting away with high-calibre firearms at three large gold-plated stainless-steel panels, one per shooter. The shooters, all of them licensed, were creating works of art. Sixty-four similarly assaulted panels would be shown at an exhibition, opening days later at the Gagosian gallery, by the artist Maurizio Cattelan, who was observing the massacre with a few invited guests. He let it be known that he had never touched a gun and probably never would.

To the spectators, who sat behind a glass wall and wore sound-reduction earmuffs, the noise was tremendous. After a few minutes, the firing stopped, long enough for each shooter to be handed a different gun, and then it resumed. Five types of guns were used, and the bullets left different marks. One pierced the steel, leaving a small, neat hole. A twelve-gauge Beretta made large dents. "That one is for shooting wild boar," Cattelan whispered, eating a bagel. (Later, Ryan Washburn, who had organized the event, refuted this. "No, no, no—that's just Maurizio," he said, laughing.)

Cattelan, a tall, sixty-three-year-old Italian with silver hair, who was wearing a black hoodie that read "GIVE SARCASM A CHANCE," had been quoted saying that the target of his Gagosian show was the spread of gun violence in the United States. At the range, though, he said that the work was not about gun violence. "It's about violence," he said, "and I use weapons as brushes." Was Cattelan going serious on us, after three decades of self-mockery and such startling works as "La Nona Ora," a life-size sculpture of Pope John Paul II felled by a meteor? He'd done it before. Three years ago, at Art Basel Hong Kong, Cattelan showed "Night," a black American flag riddled with bullet holes. Over the years, it's become clear that everything he does is serious, in part, even his world-infamous ripe banana duct-taped to a wall, which was sold in 2019 for a hundred and twenty thousand dollars—a commentary on the absurdity of the contemporary-art market.

Washburn's firm, Roaming Ronin Productions, makes improbable projects like this one possible. Along with Andy Avini, Gagosian's senior director (he's also an artist), Washburn had arranged for Cattelan to use the shooting range, on the condition that he keep the location confidential. (Talking to the three shooters was not possible.) Washburn himself would fire some rounds.

During the shooting, Avini made occasional suggestions to the shooters, using a green laser beam to identify spots that needed more impact. (Cattelan called him "the human laser.")

Maurizio Cattelan

The sixty-four plates for the Gagosian show were fabricated in Italy, and the shooting had consumed more than twenty thousand bullets. At the gallery, they have been hung together in one piece, measuring seventeen feet high by sixty-eight feet long. The panels will be sold separately, however, for three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars apiece. Now, after the day at the range in Brooklyn, Gagosian has twenty-six new ones to sell.

Cattelan hasn't had a major New York show since a 2011 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, and Gagosian had invited a panoply of artists, gallerists, and collectors to welcome him back, by attending a shooting session. (There were nine sessions in all.) Visitors were escorted upstairs to what was called "the lounge," a big room with a pool table, a lot of oversized leather armchairs on rollers, and a patterned carpet. It looked like a Hollywood version of a hunting lodge. Jeff Koons thought at first that the lounge itself was the Cattelan work of art. After going down a spiral staircase to watch the shooting, he said that he was moved by the "celestial quality" of the work. "When you see the light reflected from the bullet holes, it's like looking at the stars," Koons said. "Maurizio is a great artist." Adam McEwen, the conceptual artist known for his printed obituaries of undead people, was struck by the lounge: "I thought it was a great collision of the punishing and the sensual—the secrecy, the Bond villain, 'Eyes Wide Shut' atmosphere—as opposed to the soft warping of those gold panels." Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum's artistic director, noted the shooters' stances. "Probably like everyone else, I thought about school shootings," he said. "The sound was the most frightening part."

The day before the Gagosian opening, Artnet ran a piece on Anthony James, a British American artist whose work went on view the same day as Cattelan's in a showroom on Park Avenue. It consisted of stainless-steel panels dented by gunfire. James claimed that Cattelan had stolen his idea. Cattelan, who won a plagiarism lawsuit over his banana piece, declined to comment publicly, but in private he said, "I'm very surprised. The resemblance is uncanny. All I can say is good luck to both of us."

What makes Cattelan's panels different is their golden exterior. His reference is not just to violence but to violence *and wealth*. But maybe gold is not Cattelan's lucky metal. "America," a solid-gold toilet that he installed in a Guggenheim rest room in 2016, was stolen in 2019, while on loan to Blenheim Palace, in England, and the thieves, who are still at large, are believed to have melted it down.

"Gold is a way of hiding and seducing our gaze," Cattelan said at the range. "When gold and violence meet, it triggers something. There is a fatal attraction."

—Calvin Tomkins

MASTER CLASS
SLIME TIME

Chase Kellebrew was in demo mode in the basement laboratory of SoHo's Sloomoo Institute, which bills itself as a "multi-sensory slime experience." The institute was founded in 2019, to take advantage of the slime craze popularized by tweens on TikTok. (During the pandemic, adults joined in, drawn by slime's apparent ability to alleviate anxiety through sensory play.) Kellebrew is barely twenty. As with many a wunderkind, he is modest about his talent: creating new slime products to appease the voracious appetites of fans—some famous, such as Jessica Alba, Drew Barrymore, and Christina Aguilera—who regard him as a master.

That morning, he was unveiling some new prototypes for his bosses, Sara Schiller and Karen Robinovitz. Schiller, who has an M.B.A. and a background in hospitality, said, of Kellebrew's work, "It's just so smooth." Her eyes shone with a faraway look that called to mind the patrons of Walter White, the dispenser of Blue Sky meth, in "Breaking Bad." "The feel, the sound, the smells. It's art."

Schiller and Robinovitz first encountered Kellebrew when they bought slime from him on Etsy. "We then met him in person at a convention down in Maryland," Schiller said. "His stuff was just different, a better quality. He can do slime for kids that is just silly, or slime for adults that might have a more mature

"Now that you are older, I want you to have this to-do list that was given to me by my mom, which she got from her mom, still full of little tasks we all need you to do."

theme. I think he's a savant." (Examples of "mature" slime include Slime for Your Mind—a version created for a mental-health organization—and slime scented with lychee or tuberose.)

"He's a rock star," Robinovitz, who used to run a talent agency for influencers, said. "It's like when you have a good chocolate-chip cookie compared with an average chocolate-chip cookie. A good chocolate-chip cookie is melty in the middle without being messy. Chase makes slime like a good cookie."

Kellebrew, who wore a blue hoodie with the words "SLIME TIME" on the back, started making slime when he was thirteen. He graduated from Brooklyn Technical High School in 2022 and said that he earns "a very comfortable salary" as a full-time employee of the institute, which is within walking distance of Stuyvesant Town, where he lives with his mother.

"It's easy to create a prototype," he said. "But it can sometimes be a long, hard process to figure out how to make all this in bulk. We make about thirty-five thousand gallons a year. Each time I create a new slime recipe, I write down everything I'm using." He has his co-workers test it out. "On any given day, there are one to two running the mixers and anywhere from five to fifteen packing the slime," he said.

"He has a youthful perspective, but he's not afraid to offer his opinion to adults who are a lot older," Robinovitz said.

That day's prototype was geared toward the spring holidays. Kellebrew removed some yellow cellophane from a plate that had six circular indentations, each filled with a different slime. He explained that it was a Seder plate, with the six traditional Passover foods translated into slime: haroseth ("peach clear slime with small foam cubes, apple scent"), horseradish ("dark-red snow-fizz slime, with a lemon-ginger scent"), parsley ("light-green clear slime"), an egg ("clear slime with one yellow felt pompom to represent the yolk, unscented"), bitter herbs ("light-green butter slime"), and, not to be forgotten, a shank bone ("made out of clay").

"Everything about this is just so cute!" Robinovitz said. "It's triggering all of my senses. And my heritage."

"And we'll put a 'K' on it because it is kosher," Schiller said. "The popularity of slime is very diverse, even with the Orthodox community."

A few weeks earlier, Kellebrew had created some honey-baked-ham slime. "It smells exactly like ham," he said. "It's good for Easter, but we created it for April Fools' Day."

About eighty per cent of the prototypes make their way upstairs, to be sold in plastic tubs in the gift shop and online, or as part of monthly "surprise" slime subscription boxes (thirty-four dollars and ninety-nine cents). "Typically, vegetable-themed slimes aren't that popular," Kellebrew said. "But this Passover plate is, hopefully, an exception."

Composed of three basic ingredients—glue, borax, and pigment—slime is a far cry from the tan synthetic-rubber sphere once found inside colored plastic eggs and sold as Silly Putty. Different brands of glue make different textures, and, in addition to scents, beads and tiny plastic charms can be added—the slime possibilities are endless. Kellebrew is an expert at giving his slime sound effects, "gorgeous pops" being the most requested, with "fart sounds" a close second.

Later, a sample of another prototype, which Kellebrew called Crushed Peacock Ore, was bagged and sent out for a thirteen-year-old expert to test at home. (Unsullied specimens are known as "freshies.")

"It's really . . ." began this fussy judge, eyes closed, nostrils taking in top notes of cotton candy. Her hands kneaded the purplish goo, whose texture she likened to a "slushy avalanche." At last, a judgment. "I don't know how to describe it. . . . It's just . . . yeah, it's just perfect."

—Mike Sacks

UPGRADE DEPT.
LOUNGE LIFE

Forty-eight years ago, the writer Renata Adler referred to the 747 as "that slum of the air," and flying hasn't improved much in the intervening decades. But what about that liminal space before boarding? "You want the vacation to start earlier, right?" Leanne Fremar, the chief brand officer at JPMorgan Chase, said recently. "You've spent money on it, you've architected it and choreographed it, you want it all to be perfect. *Getting there* is sort of like having to take your medicine. But what if your vacation could start at the airport?"

In January, with Fremar's assistance, a section of LaGuardia (which President Joe Biden once compared to a Third World country) became the Sapphire Lounge. Warmly lit and plushly appointed, the lounge is the snazziest of four new Chase clubs in airports around the world. On the menu: lobster rolls, pumpkin muhammara. To drink: the Red Eye, a cocktail made with vodka, espresso, and something called pearl dust. Fremar said, "You might end up being there for a while."

She was sitting at a table at the Sunset Tower Hotel, in Los Angeles, wearing a black turtleneck and black jeans. One of her jobs is to make sure that the Chase spaces stand out amid the competition (such as American Express's twenty-five Centurion Lounges). Each has its own style. Fremar said, "Our lounge in Boston Logan should be different from the one in Phoenix Sky Harbor." She went on, "We're looking for a vintage, aged look, without bringing in collector's-level pieces. We need furniture that doesn't feel cookie-cutter." She put on her sunglasses and, seeking inspiration, walked out to a waiting S.U.V., which would shuttle her to galleries and furniture stores.

First stop: Nickey Kehoe, a West Hollywood home emporium known for a shabby-chic-gone-wild vibe. Fremar took a photo of a vase that looked like it was made of crumpled newspaper ($1,200). "We've got bookshelves, and we try to have some décor elements in there," she said. "You don't want to be kitschy, or totally generic. We're past 'living walls' and shearling cabinetmaker chairs." She looked up at a ceramic pendant light. "It's gorgeous," she said. "Craftsman."

"It's brutalist," a salesman said.

Stop two: Galerie Half. Fremar considered, then vetoed, a long, eggplant-colored couch ($33,000). "If you were sitting here," she said, having lowered herself onto the middle cushion, "you wouldn't necessarily want five strangers lined up next to you." Circular and L-shaped sectionals tend to work better, she said.

She tried out a velvet chaise longue. "Comfortable," she said, testing the cushion's give, "but not too domestic."

Stop three: Karma, an art gallery. "We have a Silvia López Chavez in Boston and a Chelsea Odufu in La-Guardia," Fremar said, taking in a marigold-heavy painting by Ouattara Watts ($325,000). "It's nice to see something big, something with color, especially when you don't have natural light."

Final stop: Gallery Are. An Italian couch from the sixties mingled with Danish chairs from the forties. Shade Degges, the shop's co-owner, said, "We only buy what I would put in *my* home. That way, when this goes out of business, I've got a house full of stuff."

Fremar eyed a tufted sapphire-blue daybed and then exclaimed at a pair of wingback chairs. She had bought them online for her own house but hadn't yet seen them in person.

"They're so pretty in real life," she said, sinking into the fuzzy camel upholstery. "And comfortable, too."

"Mohair," Degges said.

Could the chairs work in a Chase lounge? Degges and Fremar looked alarmed.

"Not *mohair*," Degges said. "It crushes."

"We have some really high-trafficked spaces," Fremar said. "People spill stuff, there are little kids. You have to be able to bleach it clean."

Degges said, "If you threw your luggage down on that chair to save a seat, it would have wheel marks until someone came over with water and a brush."

Fremar stroked the chair's nubby back. "It does bring depth to a space," she said. "My team could find an industrial-grade version of this, something with a higher Martindale." (Martindale is an industrial rating that pertains to a fabric's "rub count.") Something that could withstand the effects of innumerable Red Eyes, perhaps.

"You think about high-trafficked, with children?" Degges said, and shook his head. "Airports are like a room full of children, all the time. Non-stop rotation, every hour."

"We do have to be mindful of that," Fremar said. "Some things are better at home."

—Sheila Yasmin Marikar

SKETCHPAD BY BARRY BLITT

DROWSY DONALD'S
DREAM DIARY
11:05 A.M.
STUCK IN THE MASHED-POTATO SECTION OF AN ENORMOUS TV DINNER. CAN'T MOVE! A NIGHTMARE!
1:32 P.M.
SHAKING HANDS WITH ABRAHAM PUTIN.
3:20 P.M.
WALKING ON WATER.
3:51 P.M.
BACK IN THE OVAL! TRANSFORMED INTO A GIANT BUG, BUT STILL— BACK IN THE OVAL!

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

NEW TRICKS

An animal trainer to the stars prepares a Great Dane for his film début.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

David Siegel and Scott McGehee, filmmaking partners for three decades, both read and loved the Sigrid Nunez novel "The Friend" when it was published, in 2018. They took Nunez out to coffee, then optioned the film rights to the story, wrote a script, and began making plans to produce it.

The novel, which won the National Book Award, is narrated by an unnamed writer in Manhattan whose friend and mentor, a more famous writer, has recently died by suicide. She inherits his dog, a Great Dane named Apollo. "The Friend" is about a lot of things—grief, memory, loneliness, goatish men, writing, teaching, kids today—but it is, fundamentally, a love story between two bereaved creatures, writer and dog, seeking consolation and companionship in a treacherous world.

Siegel and McGehee had actors in mind for the narrator and the mentor, to whom they gave the names Iris and Walter, respectively. Now they needed their Apollo. In the fall of 2019, they reached out to the prominent trainer Bill Berloni, who has been supplying, hiring, and coaching animals for stage and screen for nearly fifty years. Berloni asked if it had to be a Great Dane. "Great Danes are big, dumb, and lazy," he told them. (Or, as he prefers to put it now, "They are sensitive, and not known for their obedience training.") "Can I talk you into another breed?"

The filmmakers insisted. The unwieldy size, the inconvenience, the majesty, the mournful bearing: these elements were essential. Plus, the cover of the novel had an illustration of a Great Dane on it—a Harlequin Dane, white with black spots, in a red collar. Film is a visual medium, and its practitioners are visual people. That image, as much as any description on the page, had captured their cinematographic imaginations.

With Berloni, they began a nationwide search. Berloni also works as an animal-actor agent, so he knew the landscape. The auditions folder swelled with the head shots of some thirty Great Danes. They saw dogs in Chicago, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. There was an Aggro, a Thor, a Storm, and, in Louisville, an actual Apollo. Henry, Logical, Kodiak, Legend. Berloni went to Fredericksburg to see Gage, to Sacramento to see Atom. Snazzy, visiting from Anchorage, got a tryout while in New York for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

In February, 2020, Berloni, Siegel, and McGehee rolled into Iowa. It was just after the Presidential caucuses. They'd been searching for six months and still didn't have their co-star. Preproduction was scheduled to begin in a month. They took a meeting with their latest prospect at an obedience-training club in Des Moines. This one's name was Bing. He was nearly two years old and was a bit less muscular and intimidating than some of the others they'd seen, with a gentler air. Berloni put him

"If you don't hire this dog, I'm going to represent him," Bill Berloni told the filmmakers, of Bing, after a nationwide search.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK SELIGER

through his paces, giving him a range of standard commands, and Bing responded with elegance and ease.

"If you don't hire this dog, I'm going to represent him," Berloni said.

This time, they took his advice. At the beginning of March, 2020, Bing and his owner, a business-systems consultant at Wells Fargo named Beverly Klingensmith, travelled from Iowa to Connecticut to spend some time with Berloni and his wife and business partner, Dorothy. Everybody got comfortable with everybody. The philosophies and approaches jelled. Klingensmith returned to Iowa, leaving Bing in Berloni's care.

The filmmakers got ready to shoot. And then, a week later, the world shut down. COVID. Bing went home. Then came the writers' strike, and the actors' strike, and the tangram of the talents' schedules and projects. It was four years before they resumed making the picture, right after this year's Iowa caucuses. Bing, now almost six, had had an entire election cycle to hone his craft and age into the role.

Nunez, who wasn't involved with the adaptation of her novel but had nonetheless been keeping tabs, said, "I was so anxious about Bing." Another thing Great Danes aren't known for is longevity; their average life span is just eight years. "I was hoping that Bing would just hang in there," she said.

Bing arrived in New York by minivan on January 9th of this year, with Klingensmith, whom everyone calls Bev. She had enough paid time off at Wells Fargo to accompany Bing as a trainer on the shoot. They planned to be in the city and away from home for three months: one for rehearsal, then two for shooting. No one, including Bev, would tell me how much she was making to furnish and train Bing. "For people who lead normal lives, it's a nice chunk of change," Berloni said. "She's getting five figures for her participation. She's not doing this for profit."

The production had rented a four-bedroom house on Staten Island. To receive a film-industry tax break, the dog had to stay in New York, and Staten Island was the best option for an affordable rental with an ample back yard. Bing and Bev moved in, as did Berloni and one of his trainers, Trisha Nguyen. Another trainer, Kelli Gautreau, commuted from New Jersey. During the next few weeks, Bing and his housemates travelled to Manhattan for rehearsals and training sessions.

Two weeks before shooting, Bing had a wardrobe fitting at the production offices, in Chelsea. Berloni arrived early, straight from a meeting with the producers of a Broadway show. "They want me to help them put the most dogs ever onstage," he told me. "Twenty-five to thirty dogs, unleashed. A dog-park scene. I'm looking at them, like, You realize, right, that trained dogs are just going to sit there and wait for the command. I did 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' twenty years ago. That was ten dogs. I said, 'I'm never going to do this again.'"

Berloni is sixty-seven, trim, and deliberate in his movements in a way that makes him seem both chilled out and tightly wound. His uncommon attention to the temperament of animals manifests as poise. He has graying hair and a neat beard and brings to mind Steven Spielberg, without the billions. He typically wears jeans and a black Carhartt jacket. He and Dorothy live in central Connecticut, on a farm they call Little Arfin' Acres, with twenty dogs, four donkeys, three cats, two geese, a macaw, and a pig, all of them for hire. He grew up on another farm nearby; his father was the horticulturist to the city of New Britain.

"I wanted to be an actor," he told me. "I wanted to go to Yale Drama School, but my parents couldn't afford it. So I got a job as an apprentice at the Goodspeed Opera House, in East Haddam. They put on revivals and musicals. Dozens of shows went from there to Broadway. I was basically there building scenery."

It was the summer of 1976, and the Goodspeed was launching a new musical called "Annie," based on the comic strip. "There was a part for a dog, but they had no trainer," Berloni said. "I was nineteen. I had no experience. They gave me thirty-five dollars to buy a dog and feed it all summer. I went down to the Connecticut Humane Society and found a dog that was going to be put to sleep the next day. They wanted seven dollars for the dog. That was the first Sandy." Sandy had apparently suffered abuse and spooked easily, so Berloni kept the dog with him at all times, leashing him to the stage while he built sets.

The show bombed at the Goodspeed. Walter Kerr, in the *Times*, wrote, "The evening, like the strip, doesn't even try to be funny." Still, Kerr went easy on the dog—"Sandy is all right (he's bigger than Annie)"—and so, when Mike Nichols signed on to produce the piece and take it to Broadway the following year, Sandy and Berloni were asked to reprise their roles. Berloni had enrolled at New York University and was studying with Stella Adler. Now he had to hone his skills as a trainer. For one scene, as he recounts in his memoir, "Broadway Tails," he devised a way to get Sandy to stop mid-stage; instead of using a dog treat, which would bounce off the floorboards and make a sound, a member of the cast would drop a bit of baloney. This technique would come to be known as the Baloney Drop. Its originator became Bill Baloney. ("I was Bill Baloney in third grade, actually," Berloni said.) This time, the show was a huge hit, as was Sandy, who, at least according to Berloni, was the first dog ever to play a central character onstage. "And that's how I became a world-famous animal trainer at twenty," he said.

Since then, he has been the go-to animal handler for hundreds of Broadway musicals and plays. He's done other "Annie"s, and countless movies and TV shows, but he tends to be leery of Hollywood, because TV and movie people often have unreasonable expectations of animals.

"We did 'Annie' on NBC a few years ago," he said. "Live, on network TV. The producers said, 'We've already hired an animal trainer.' This was a Hollywood animal trainer, who said, 'I can do it in eight days.' I say, 'You can't do it in eight days!' A week before airing, on the second day, the dog bit a child in the face. Guess who gets the call?"

He felt differently about "The Friend." "Scott and David aren't like the filmmakers I've worked with," he said. "They really care about the animals. They want to do it right."

Seasoned film producers might dispense droll prohibitions against kids and dogs, but rare is the IMDb page without them. Rin Tin Tin, a battlefield rescue from the First World War,

was the cash cow that propelled the career of Darryl Zanuck and the rise of Warner Bros.; Lassie got the industry through the star-wary years of the Red Scare. Meanwhile, trainers built their own careers and fortunes. The grandest of them all was Frank Inn, who had been an assistant to Lassie's trainer, Rudd Weatherwax, of the Weatherwax family—trainers, too, of Toto and Old Yeller and Asta. (Many movie dogs were actually multiple dogs.) Inn's mutt Higgins, discovered in Burbank, was sixteen when he came out of retirement, after six seasons on "Petticoat Junction," to originate the role of Benji. Higgins's daughter Benjean took over for several of the sequels, including "Oh! Heavenly Dog" (1980), starring Chevy Chase and Omar Sharif. Cujo, if you're wondering, was at least four St. Bernards, a mechanical dog, and a stuntman in a dog suit.

At the Chelsea production offices, an elevator door opened and there was Bing, magisterial in every respect: a lean, muscular hundred and forty-five pounds and, by the prop department's tape measure, forty-two inches tall from his forepaws to the top of his skull. His snout, like Roger Federer's neck, flushes pink when he gets tired or stressed. He has a splotch on his scrotum and a long ropy tail. He projected mild curiosity, self-possession, some awkwardness: your basic arriving-at-an-office vibe. Bev, at his side, wore a long parka and jeans, had short dark hair and glasses, and projected forbearance and good humor. Berloni said that I could greet Bing once but would afterward have to avoid petting him or making eye contact, to keep his allegiances and attentions focussed on him and Bev, and on Naomi Watts, who was playing Iris, the film's protagonist. Bing and I savored our moment, he left some slobber on my sweater, and then he got to work.

The prop masters, Gino Fortebuono and Rebecca Spiro, had laid out an array of expensive-looking collars and leashes, of varying sizes and shades of red. "We're searching for the perfect size, the perfect width, the perfect red," Spiro said. "Really, it's an homage to the book cover."

Bing sniffed at the collars, then stood still as Fortebuono put one on him, with a deferential attempt at delicacy and haste. Everyone stepped back to assess Bing as Bev and Berloni had him strike a few poses.

"I know it sounds nuts, but we should try a brighter red," Spiro said. They swapped collars. Spiro, apparently accustomed to working with actors, said to Bing, "You're beautiful! There's no one more beautiful than you."

There were other props and accommodations to consider: Fortebuono unwrapped a giant plush panda, to use as a stand-in for Bing during setup and lighting, and a new air mattress, to rehearse scenes set in Iris's apartment. He and the props team discussed a kind of thin chrome matting that they were considering for a shoot on a Brooklyn pier. They didn't want to expose Bing's paws to the pier's old splintery planks and protruding nails, so they'd found some "chroma" to roll over it like a carpet. The board pattern would be restored in postproduction, by way of C.G.I. Michael O'Brien, the crew's transportation captain, came over to discuss modifications he'd devised for Bing's trailer, since the steel stairs were too steep and dog ramps were too narrow to accommodate Bing and a handler. O'Brien had procured a moving-van ramp instead. They also strategized about building a bench for a scene aboard a boat, and a special passenger seat for a scene in a car, so that Bing's head would be even with Watts's. "We'll have to remove the seat and replace it with something else," Berloni said. "And I'll be hiding on the floor at his feet."

In film, we intuit or even celebrate ingenuities and work-arounds in the service of illusion. The fake blood, the cars on rails, the Potemkin villages, not to mention the computer graphics, the herds and armies and tempests that exist only in code. We don't often indulge the frugal point of view—that all this trickery is excessive and wasteful, in practical rather than aesthetic terms. Fealty to the script and to the vision of the cinematographer—the devotion to the deception—requires adjustments to the world of real things which can seem, to a layman used to making do, unduly elaborate. Why not rewrite the scene, to make it more practical to shoot? Why not choose a splinterless pier, with flush and freshly hammered nails? Because there's a magic carpet, and it's awesome. And we must insure that no animals are harmed in the making of this film.

Spiro said to Bing, "You want to try a beautiful outfit?"

They put him in a zip-collar sweater and then in a red harness.

"Is it too busy?"

"It's too teched out."

"Can we get a photo of him in the sphinx position? He's going to be in this position on a train."

"Down," Bev said, in a moderate tone. Bing settled into the sphinx, ears pricked up, tail tucked under his rear. "Good boy!" she said, in falsetto. A line producer strolled by, tried to throw an empty coffee cup into a nearby garbage can, and missed. "Leave it," Bev murmured, in a low husky voice. The dog gave her a droopy-hound glance and resumed posing for the camera.

Bev lives on a ten-acre property in Newton, Iowa, with one of her two adult sons and her husband, a corrections officer. She breeds Great Danes and also has a sideline in dog photography. Her kennel is called Foto Danes. On her forearm she has a tattoo of a paw print, with an image of a camera aperture in place of the metacarpal pad. "My two loves," she said.

Bing is her sixth Great Dane, if you count only those she and her family have kept in their home. When an executive producer of "The Friend" first reached out to her, in 2019, Bev deleted the e-mail. "It seemed far-fetched and crazy," she said. But then she fished it out of the trash. After the production was interrupted, she put off getting him fixed, because the script of the film called for an intact male.

The key to Bing's performance was his relationship with Watts. They had started rehearsing together at Watts's home in Tribeca as soon as he got to New York. For their final session, an assistant brought Bing, Bev, Berloni, and Nguyen in out of the rain, and Watts

came down a broad stairway holding her own dog, Izzy, a Yorkie-Chihuahua mix. Watts wore yoga pants and a loose sweater. Izzy and Bing, who'd become friendly, greeted each other first, with Bev and Berloni taking care that the big dog not crush the small one. (Izzy often hung around the set and would eventually appear as an extra in a scene at a pet store.) Then Watts greeted Bing. The first time they'd met, Watts had fed him bits of salami. This time, Berloni handed her a brown bag of equivalently decadent but healthier treats he'd prepared on Staten Island. His aim, he said, was for Watts to surpass him in Bing's hierarchy of handlers, to rank second after Bev. Now he yielded control to Watts, whose goal was to develop firm control of Bing while appearing on camera to be fumbling, a bit of a newb, for the sake of the story.

They worked in a mirrored gym off the front hallway. Watts led Bing on some laps. "Going through doors safely is a skill," Berloni said. At one point, as Watts told Bing to stay, Berloni tried to distract him by dancing around and making noise. Bing held his pose. "Good boy!" Bev and Watts cried.

"He doesn't like it when he makes mistakes," Watts said.

She took him out for a couple laps around the block, with Berloni and Nguyen jogging ahead to serve as sentinels on the corners, on the lookout for dogs or other threats. The streets were perilous. "In desensitizing him to scary things, you don't want to throw him into the deep end," Berloni said. "Two poodles at twelve o'clock."

Bing mostly encountered admiration. Everywhere he went, people noticed.

"It's like being out with a rock star," Watts said.

I'd been out with him before, on crowded blocks near the production offices. Passersby smiled and made remarks. "What a beauty"; "Magnificent. Such a great beast"; "What is that?"; "That's a pony"; "Horse"; "I have two Great Danes in my building, owned by a Dane." When Bing lifted his leg on a planter, civilians scattered. The stream brought to mind a fireboat in Hell Gate.

In Tribeca, the session ended with Watts and Bing lying on the floor beside each other. A cuddle for the costars. "I've never worked on a film where there's so much coöperation from an actor," Berloni said. "I'm jumping up and down inside."

The house on Staten Island was on a busy street in the Mid-Island section, a few blocks off the Expressway. A row of prodigiously used poop bags guarded the gate to the back yard. "Welcome to the house that's too small for two Great Danes!" Berloni said.

The other Dane was Bing's understudy, a Harlequin from Chicago named Wilder, who was also staying in the house. "There's no understudy for Naomi Watts," Berloni said. "It's a celebrity thing."

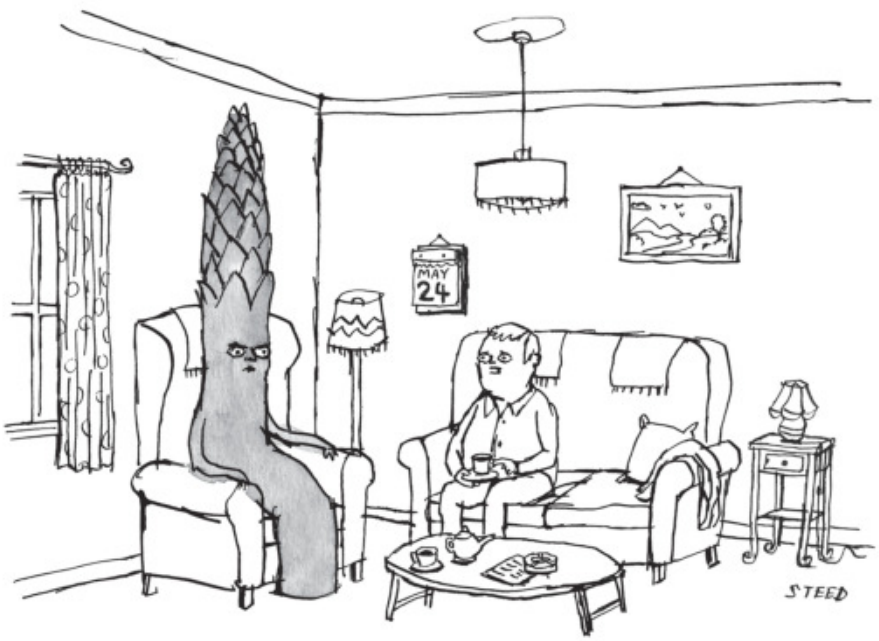
Wilder and Bing share a grandfather, a prominent show champion named Fender. Wilder, like Bing, has two different-colored eyes and a splotch on his scrotum. When Stephanie Kelley, his owner, got a call from Bev about the understudy job on "The Friend," she bought Nunez's book, but Wilder chewed it up before she could finish reading it, so she doesn't know how it ends.

Wilder was in the kitchen. "Be prepared to be slobbered on," Berloni said. "Don't look him in the eye. You are a pretext for a training session: how to introduce a stranger to the inner sanctum. It's never happened before and won't ever happen again." It was like approaching a Hollywood villa occupied by two Marlon Brandos. Using a strap and a clip, Berloni and the others had rigged a makeshift harness around Wilder's posterior to keep his tail from whacking into things as it wagged: a jollity belt.

Wilder and Bing, being intact males, weren't allowed to be in the same place at the same time, lest they fight. They'd never laid muzzles on each other, despite sharing the house. "Do I want to spend the next five weeks trying to make them best friends? No," Berloni said. The trainers had worked out a system to let one dog out while the other remained in his room. Wilder was distinguishable from Bing by his Chicago Cubs collar and by his relative exuberance, though he was getting more temperate under the tutelage of Berloni and others. "He didn't sniff my crotch today!" Kelli Gautreau said.

They took Wilder to the basement for a training session. During each lap, he glanced at me, the stranger in the sanctum. ("Good observation," Berloni said when I mentioned this.) Eventually, Gautreau led Wilder up to his crate on the second floor, and Bev went to get Bing. "Do you want me to bring down the ham?" she called from upstairs.

Bing paid me no mind. "That's the difference between a trained dog



"That's not fair. I do <u>not</u> only visit you once a year on National Asparagus Day."

and an untrained dog," Berloni said.

Ever dutiful, ever morose, Bing followed orders and gobbled up treats. They had particular behaviors to teach and scenes to get him ready for—or, really, to figure out their own choreography for, the human gestures and body positioning that would elicit the desired canine reactions. This involved a constantly shifting exchange of control, like the possession of the conch in "Lord of the Flies." There was one scene in the script where Bing circles Watts while she's asleep on a mattress on the floor (Berloni alternately hid and pretended to hide treats under the mattress); one where Bing, against his nature, puts a paw on her chest; and another where, against his training, he scratches at a door. There were dozens of what Berloni called "difficult actions." At one point, Bing was supposed to grab a T-shirt and play keep-away with Watts—"Huge plot point," Berloni said—but this was a tough ask, the source of Bev's greatest worry. "A couple of years ago, he didn't even like anything in his mouth at all," she said.

Upstairs, Wilder, apparently jealous, howled in his crate.

On weekends, Berloni tried to get back to the farm, even if just for a night, but the prep for and then the shooting of "The Friend" ate up the hours. He was also busy with other jobs. He drove around the tri-state area at all hours to meet with animals and, while in transit, often mixed up the text threads on his phone.

"On Monday morning, I have a go-see in New Jersey," he said one afternoon. "It's a cow I've never met. A milking cow." He had to drop off his bulldog Myrtle, who is a regular on "And Just Like That . . . ," the sequel to "Sex and the City," for an A.T. & T. commercial shoot in New Jersey. He was also rehearsing "an animal" (an N.D.A. prevented him from saying what kind) for "Only Murders in the Building" and arranging a falcon shoot for a show called "The Savant" (which he referred to as "the hawk job" when he mistakenly texted me about it). He was consulting on a hit play from London, "The Hunt," which was opening at St. Ann's Warehouse. He showed me a photo of the setup on his phone. (As he did so, a text popped up on his screen, from Nguyen: "You texted the wrong thread.") In the play, a hunting dog has to sit patiently inside a glass house, with a trapdoor underneath, without moving or turning his head, while men with deer heads run around the stage. His description of all this had a wearied what'll-they-think-of-next timbre. Sometimes Gautreau told him, "Bill, you know everything works out in the end. Haven't you read your own book?"

He'd set up an office in the extra bedroom in Staten Island, across the hall from Wilder's crate. On the wall was a gallery of head shots of some of the extras in the cast of "The Friend." Cutie, Rocco, Mr. Tibbs. Stella, a French bulldog in a wheelchair, a veteran actor. Some of them were his, from his farm. He repped them all. Since Bing can't perform with other males, Berloni had brought him to the farm to audition some females. "He chose the four he wants in his movie," Berloni said.

"Now I have a production meeting about earthworms," Berloni said. He has been providing animals to "Sesame Street" for twenty-five years. In the office, he got on a Zoom call about an upcoming sketch that included a soil bed teeming with Canadian earthworms. The producers wanted Berloni to make the worms faster and more active. "There aren't a lot of speeds, with worms," he said. Ultimately, his advice was to speed up the film.

Downstairs, Bing was preparing to rehearse a scene in which he steals a hot dog from a vender's hand. "They want a comedic take of gulp and gone," Berloni said. "A hot dog and a bun is a lot. It's either one take with a hot dog and a bun or three takes with hot dogs, no bun. There's no *Journal of Hot-Dog-Eating Takes* for film dogs."

In the kitchen, Bev held out a frank in a bun. Bing sniffed at it, daintily removed it from the bun, and began to chomp on it, so that the end of it wagged like a cigar. Comedic, maybe, but not gulp and gone. They taped two attempts. "We will send that to the director today for discussion," Berloni said.

The hot dogs presented another kind of problem once filming began. American Humane, the organization responsible for the "no animals were harmed" designation, monitors productions of all sizes and kinds. The representative on "The Friend" was a woman named Kendall Tinston. Throughout the shoot, she kept an eye on Bing, Bev, and Berloni, occasionally asking whether Bing might be tired or cold or even suggesting to the directors that the dog might need a break. Berloni, who is the director of animal behavior and training at the Humane Society of New York, was in no way opposed to her presence, and welcomed the additional voice, but the exigencies of a shoot sometimes made her interventions thorny.

So it went with the hot dogs. Berloni had thought of them, incorrectly, as treats rather than props, which fall under American Humane's purview. Tinston asked Berloni for the ingredients list, which showed trace amounts of garlic powder and onion powder. "Dogs can be allergic to those," Berloni said. "The ingredients don't say how much, but American Humane doesn't want a dog to have a reaction." Tinston suggested some paprika-seasoned hot dogs available only in New Jersey, so one of the prop masters went out to buy four dozen. (In the end, they never shot the scene.) Then, a couple of days later, Berloni, working on a scene that called for Bing to drink water, added chicken broth to the dog's bowl. Again, Tinston asked to see the ingredients. Onions. "I felt badly again," Berloni said. "I hadn't thought of it as a prop." He wound up formulating his own broth, by microwaving Bing's plain cooked chicken in a bowl of water.

There were a few things that kept Berloni awake at night as the shoot approached.

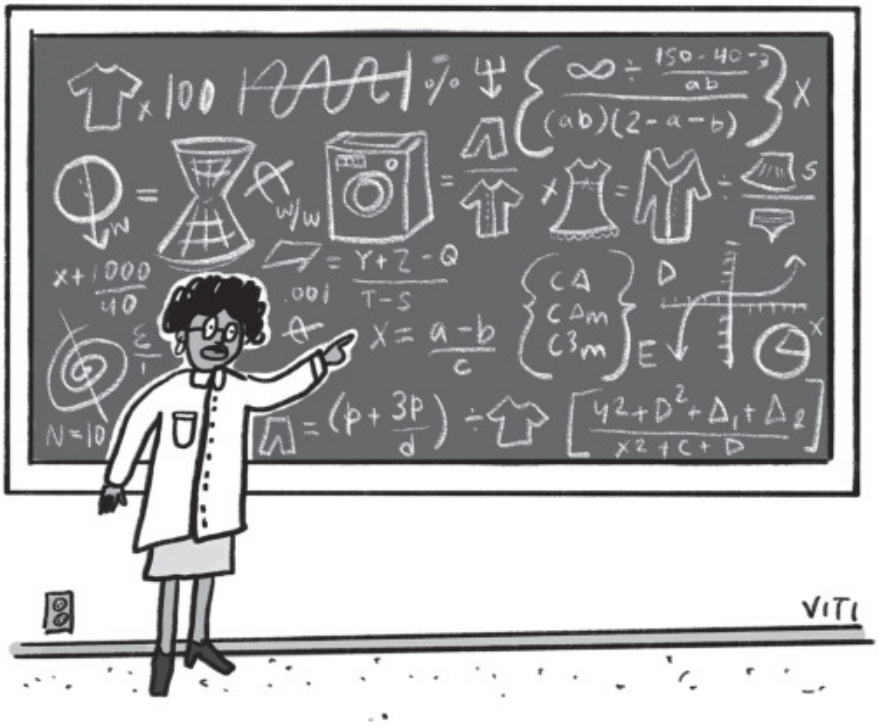
For starters, there was Day One—Apollo at a veterinarian's office. "The vet exam haunts my dreams," Berloni said. It was a tight, hot set, with Bing on a table and a stranger touching him in ways and places he tended to object to. "Oh, it was face, butt, ears, lips, everything," Berloni said afterward. But Bing handled it well. Up the next morning at

four-thirty with Berloni and Bev, he was raring to go. As the weeks went on, he seemed more and more excited to work.

There were other scenes that concerned Berloni—a near-collision with a cyclist, a memorial service aboard a boat in the East River, a beach sequence with lapping waves. The script also called for a butterfly to land on Bing's nose. "Bill doesn't do butterflies," Gautreau said. ("Actually, I have done butterflies," Berloni said, and described an advertisement he'd done for Huffman Koos furniture, for which an entomologist he'd hired brought six monarchs and a vial of "sex potion"—a Baloney Drop for butterflies.)

A day of shooting in Washington Square Park was supposed to culminate in a dog-run scene, featuring the females that Bing had got on well with on Berloni's farm. But, after preliminary discussions about who'd be scooping up what (Berloni to one of the directors: "We're going to pick up our dogs' poop—I hope they don't expect us to pick up other dogs' poop"), the Parks Department told the filmmakers that it couldn't close the dog run to the public, which would, in effect, prevent the production from filming there. Instead, the filmmakers considered a nearby humpy expanse of artificial turf, but the department would not permit the dogs to be off leash, even if each had its own trainer on hand. "The invisible leash is the treats in your pocket," Berloni said. The filmmakers reworked the shot.

Another worry didn't involve Bing at all. In the film, in a sequence that's more fantasy than flashback, Watts has some scenes with Bill Murray, who plays Walter, and a dachshund. They shot these in a Brooklyn brownstone, during the fourth week of filming. The set was closed, but Berloni, a few days later, recalled what they'd taken to calling D Day: "The dachshund day was totally stressful. We had a kerfuffle. Dachshunds are high-strung. I told them this. I said we'd need to get the dachshund to sniff around before the shoot. The house would have to be empty. If dogs like that feel safe, at least they *kind of* pay attention. But when we got there everything was set up, the crew was ready. 'The dachshund just has to sit on the couch. Let's just shoot it.' And then he wouldn't stay, wouldn't stay, wouldn't stay, wouldn't stay. 'Is he gonna stay?' 'Um, probably not.' 'Take him away!' So, in effect, they couldn't get the shot they wanted."



"And that is why, no matter how many clothes you own, you will always do the same amount of laundry."

• •

On set, Murray grumbled, "I could do a better job training a wasp." (Shooting a scene with Bing near the Brooklyn Bridge, Murray tucked bits of chicken under his shoelaces, to get Bing to like him.)

"I consider it to be a complete failure," Berloni said. The next morning, at 6 A.M., Berloni got an hour alone in the house with the dog. "And, that day, we got all the shots," he said. "Including like twenty takes of the dachshund jumping up on a chair."

Bing proved to be a pro. He aced the difficult actions, including the T-shirt keep-away. ("He did great on his hold," Bev said.) Whenever an actor wrapped, the cast and crew, as per tradition, applauded on set, and each time Bing howled along. In the sixth week, Bing nailed the beach scene on a strand in Oyster Bay. Take after take, lying on his side in the sand, he glanced back over his shoulder at Watts, as the script demanded. During one setup, Siegel, the director, noticed, in the monitor, that Bing's testicles seemed more prominent than usual and asked Bev if she might tuck them under his tail. She tried, as Tinston, the American Humane rep, looked on. "They're untuckable," Bev said. When the day was done, Siegel gave Berloni and Bev a hug. He'd anticipated that Bing would come up short and that they would have had to resort to C.G.I. Berloni was glad he hadn't known this before: "I would have been a nervous wreck."

Before Watts's last day with Bing, Berloni told people, "If Naomi doesn't cry, we haven't done our job." Sure enough, after she'd wrapped her last scene, aboard a Metro-North railcar, she realized that she wouldn't see Bing again and went running back to his van, with tears welling, to say goodbye.

Berloni could now look back on all the years and find purpose and meaning, the hand of fate. "There's a revival of 'Annie' in 2027," he said. "After that, I will drop the leash and retire."

He fantasized about going to the Academy Awards. Messi, the Border collie from "Anatomy of a Fall," had just aced his Oscars cameo; maybe next year it would be Bing's turn. By then, he'd likely be neutered, in time for the rigors of the promotional tour. ♦

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

READ THE LABEL

How psychiatric diagnoses create identities.

BY MANVIR SINGH

To name something—to separate it from the rest of existence and bestow a label on it—is a foundational act. It is the beginning of understanding and control. In Genesis, the first thing God did after splitting light from darkness was to call the light "day" and the darkness "night." After Adam was created and let loose in the Garden of Eden, his original job was human label-maker. God brought him creatures "to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name."

If Adam was like most people, he probably set about attaching names to "natural kinds"—groupings seemingly dictated by inherent features of the natural world. Referring to a group of animals as "pigs," he would have assumed that the critters so designated all shared properties that differentiated them from every other non-pig animal. Psychologists say that we intuitively treat categorical distinctions—whether among fruits, emotions, or ethnic groups—as if (in Plato's famous metaphor) they carved nature at its joints.

No sector of human activity is as serious about naming, or as intent on respecting natural kinds, as science. Across centuries of debate and revision, fields such as physics, chemistry, and biology have refined nomenclatures to better align with the natural order. Psychiatry, at first, looks like another success story. Years of research and clinical observation have yielded catalogues of presumed mental dysfunction, culminating in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or *DSM*. First produced by the American Psychiatric Association seven decades ago, and currently in its fifth edition, the *DSM* organizes conditions into families such as "anxiety disorders," "sexual dysfunctions," and "personality disorders." Each diagnosis is described by clear criteria and accompanied by a menu of information, including prevalence, risk factors, and comorbidities. Although clinicians and researchers have understood the *DSM* to be a work in progress, many had faith that the manual's categories would come to approximate natural kinds, exhibiting, as the Columbia psychiatry professor Jerrold Maxmen put it in 1985, "specific genetic patterns, characteristic responses to drugs, and similar biological features."

More than any other document, the *DSM* guides how Americans, and, to a lesser extent, people worldwide, understand and deal with mental illness. It decrees psychiatric vocabulary, having codified terms like "attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder" and "post-traumatic stress disorder." It determines which conditions are taught in medical schools, which can be treated by F.D.A.-approved drugs, and which allow people to collect disability benefits and insurance reimbursements. Through its classification of mental illnesses, it establishes their prevalence in the population and indicates which ones public policy should target.

The *DSM* as we know it appeared in 1980, with the publication of the *DSM-III*. Whereas the first two editions featured broad classifications and a psychoanalytic perspective, the *DSM-III* favored more precise diagnostic criteria and a more scientific approach. Proponents hoped that research in genetics and neuroscience would corroborate the *DSM's* groupings. Almost half a century later, however, the emerging picture is of overlapping conditions, of categories that blur rather than stand apart. No disorder has been tied to a specific gene or set of genes. Nearly

Can an artificial, shifting array of clinical categories really tell us who we are?

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

all genetic vulnerabilities implicated in mental illness have been associated with many conditions. A review of more than five hundred fMRI studies of people engaged in specific tasks found that, although brain imaging can detect indicators of mental illness, it fails to distinguish between schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, and other conditions. The *DSM's* approach to categorization increasingly looks arbitrary and anachronistic.

Steven Hyman, who directed the National Institute of Mental Health from 1996 to 2001, told the *Times* that he considered the manual an "absolute scientific nightmare." In 2009, four leaders of the *DSM-5* revision wrote about their hopes to "update our classification to recognize the most prominent syndromes that are actually present in nature." The outcome didn't live up to those aspirations. In April, 2013, weeks before the *DSM-5's* slated release, Thomas Insel, then the director of the N.I.M.H., remarked, "The final product involves mostly modest alterations of the previous edition." As a result, he announced, the institute "will be re-orienting its research away from *DSM* categories."

In "DSM: A History of Psychiatry's Bible" (2021), the medical sociologist Allan V. Horwitz presents reasons for the *DSM-5's* botched revolution, including infighting among members of the working groups and the sidelining of clinicians during the revision process. But there's a larger difficulty: revamping the *DSM* requires destroying kinds of people. As the philosopher Ian Hacking observed, labelling people is very different from labelling quarks or microbes. Quarks and microbes are indifferent to their labels; by contrast, human classifications change how "individuals experience themselves—and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behavior in part because they are so classified." Hacking's best-known example is multiple personality disorder. Between 1972 and 1986, the number of cases of patients with multiple personalities exploded from the double digits to an estimated six thousand. Whatever one's thoughts about the reality of M.P.D., he observed, everyone could agree that, in 1955, "this was not a way to be a person." No such diagnosis existed. By 1986, though, multiple personality disorder was not only a recognized psychiatric label; it was also sanctioned by academics, popular books, talk shows, and, most important, the experiences of people with multiple personalities. Hacking referred to this process, in which naming creates the thing named—and in which the meaning of names can be affected, in turn, by the name bearers—as "dynamic nominalism."

Three new books—Paige Layle's "But Everyone Feels This Way: How an Autism Diagnosis Saved My Life," Patric Gagne's "Sociopath: A Memoir," and Alexander Kriss's "Borderline: The Biography of a Personality Disorder"—illustrate how psychiatric classification shapes the people it describes. It models social identities. It offers scripts for how to behave and explanations for one's interior life. By promising to tell people who they really are, diagnosis produces personal stakes in the diagnostic system, fortifying it against upheaval.

Just as personality tests (see, I'm an introvert!), astrological signs (I'm a Libra!), and generational monikers (I'm Gen Z!) are used to aid self-understanding, so are psychiatric diagnoses. When Paige Layle was fifteen, a psychiatrist told her that she had autism spectrum disorder. She describes the rush of clarity she experienced when hearing the *DSM-5* criteria: "*I'm not crazy. I'm not making it up. I'm not manipulative or trying to fake anything. . . . There's a reason why I'm the way that I am.*"

Layle's diagnosis—and her discovery that "so many of my questions have one clear answer"—comes halfway through her book. The chapters leading up to it recount the frustration and confusion of being inexplicably different. She lists her "traits" early on: picking at her skin, pulling out her hair, cutting tags from her clothes, dissociating at the sound of fireworks. By the first grade, she says, she could read almost as well as a sixth grader, and in later years, she consistently earned high marks, yet she failed to decipher implicit meanings of texts in English class. She also struggled with anxiety; she was, in her words, "the weird kid who cried all the time and was so stressed that she wanted to die every single day."

In 2020, she posted a video on TikTok slamming a trend that used "autistic" to mean "dumb." It went viral. With a bluntness easily mistaken for vanity, she told the camera, "Hi, there, I'm autistic. I'm also the smartest person I've ever met, O.K.?" In the years since, she has become one of the most popular autism-awareness activists on the platform, attracting more than two and a half million followers. Bubbly and socially perceptive, with expertly applied makeup and a way of looking into the camera that's both intimate and intense, she defies common expectations of what an autistic person looks like—while also delivering a message about the diversity of autism's expressions, and especially its different presentations in men and women.

Some organizations and style guides now urge what is called person-first language ("person with autism") over diagnosis-first language ("autistic person"). These recommendations are "straight-up, basic ableism," Layle writes in her book. "I am autistic. I am always autistic, in every situation, all of the time, 24-7. . . . I would be a completely different person if I wasn't autistic, and the idea of who that person would be is something I could never figure out, because autism is such an integral part of my identity. To take it away would be to take all of me away, and I find it ableist to want to try."

What it means to be autistic, however, is constantly in flux. Over the past twenty years, the prevalence of autism in the United States has quadrupled, according to the C.D.C. A major driver of this surge has been a broadening of the definition and a lowering of the diagnostic threshold. Among people diagnosed with autism, an international meta-analysis in *JAMA Psychiatry* found, evidence of the psychological and neurological traits associated with the condition declined by up to eighty per cent between 2000 and 2015. Although many celebrate the expansion of autism as better characterizing its many varieties, leading researchers, such as Laurent Mottron and Uta Frith, worry that the heterogeneity dilutes a natural category. Temple Grandin, the academic and autism spokesperson, told

the *Observer* in 2022, "The spectrum is so broad it doesn't make much sense."

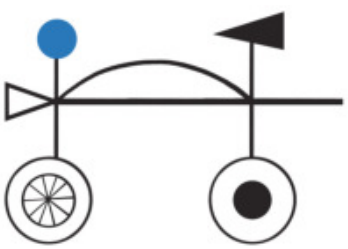
Layle's autism is likely a product of this expansion. Her psychiatrist told her that, had she visited a couple of years earlier, he would have diagnosed her with Asperger's syndrome, not autism. But one of the few big changes implemented between the *DSM-IV* and the *DSM-5* was the collapse of "pervasive developmental disorders," including Asperger's, into "autism spectrum disorder." The act that Layle considers such a violation—being deprived of her diagnosis and thus her identity—was inflicted on the entirety of the "Aspie" community. What's more, many people once diagnosed as having Asperger's learned that, under the new criteria, they wouldn't qualify as having autism spectrum disorder. The change caused fear and confusion, and, for some, felt like a denial of nature itself. "It surprises me that they'd remove that label when it's very clearly something that exists," a British man formerly diagnosed as having Asperger's told the psychologist Bethan Chambers. "I'm now a member of an endangered species."

The erasure of Asperger's offers a glimpse into what a larger diagnostic revolution might herald. The term was coined in 1981 and first appeared in the *DSM-IV,* in 1994. Thriving communities soon developed around the label, including Aspies for Freedom, an online group that had close to fifty thousand members in 2013. Individuals with Asperger's led the opposition to a unified autism diagnosis. Once they failed, and it became clear that the new manual would not only remove Asperger's syndrome but also deprive many former Aspies of a place on the spectrum, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network successfully lobbied the *DSM-5* neurodevelopmental-disorders working group to broaden the diagnostic criteria and allow people with previous Asperger's diagnoses to be recognized as autistic. A community created by a label sought to keep that label alive and, barring that, to maintain their inclusion in the system writ large.

"But Everyone Feels This Way" is a heartfelt, vulnerable book about understanding and accepting autism in a world that constantly demands normalcy. At the same time, it hinges on the disorder being as it is presented in the *DSM-5*: both a spectrum and a natural kind, wildly various but biologically grounded. "I hope that, with knowledge and technology continuously improving in the science world, neurologists and other experts on neurodevelopment will eventually be the ones diagnosing ASD, not psychiatrists basing their diagnosis on arbitrary actions," Layle writes. Yet the same research threatens to destabilize the spectrum and her place on it.

Like Layle, Patric Gagne noticed that "something was off" as a child. By the age of seven, she had a box full of stolen trinkets. When a classmate invited her over for a slumber party, she left after everyone else fell asleep and walked the streets of San Francisco. Around the age of nine, she locked two girls out of her house; after one of them told Gagne, "Your house sucks, and so do you," Gagne stabbed her in the head with a No. 2 pencil. (The girl survived.) Emotions such as anger and happiness came easily, she writes in "Sociopath: A Memoir," but "empathy and guilt, embarrassment and jealousy were like a language I couldn't speak or understand."

During her first year at U.C.L.A., Gagne says, she started "stealing" cars, which meant persuading drunk boys at frat parties to lend her their keys, going on nighttime joy rides, and then returning the cars before morning. It was around that time, she writes, that



she first understood the meaning of "sociopath," through an introduction-to-psychology class. The professor described sociopaths as people prone to apathy who behave badly out of a desperation to feel something. The concept clicked for Gagne. "I'd always longed for some sort of evidence that I wasn't alone, validation that I wasn't the only person in the world who *didn't* feel things like everyone else," she writes. "I'd always suspected, but now I knew for sure. There were enough people like me to justify an entire psychological category."

But sociopathy isn't a psychological category, at least not diagnostically. The first edition of the *DSM* included "sociopathic personality disturbance"—a grouping that spanned callous lawbreakers, sexual deviants, and people with substance-abuse problems. The term "sociopathic" was dropped from the *DSM-II* with the arrival of "antisocial personality disorder," even as the word remained popular outside clinical diagnoses. Some scholars associated sociopathy with remorseless and impulsive behavior caused by a brain injury. Other people associated it with an antisocial personality. In "The Sociopath Next Door" (2005), the psychologist Martha Stout used it to mean a lack of conscience. Gagne, for her part, positions sociopathy as something real but missing from the *DSM*, a stand-in for her own categorically confounding antisocialness.

Of course, trusting a self-professed sociopath can be tricky. "The story you are about to read is true," she declares in the preface, before admitting, in the introduction, "I'm a liar," and describing herself as "highly manipulative." Her credibility feels especially thin when she talks about scholarship. Despite many mentions of "my doctorate" and "my research," her book never cites that research; it hardly ever cites other researchers, either. I couldn't locate any published papers by her in the usual databases. Her academic credentials have been a matter of public scrutiny, with both Redditors and a recent *Times* reviewer pointing to the unavailability of her dissertation online.

If we take her at her word, though, she exists in a psychiatric purgatory. She only half identifies with antisocial personality disorder as it is presented in *DSM-IV*. When a therapist screens her using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, her score is higher than average but not high enough to qualify her as a psychopath. She also violates many popular assumptions about antisocial people. "I don't care what other people think," she says, before describing how she longed for her mother's approval.

CROSSING BYWAYS

On Sunday afternoons
I'd walk the steel overpass
above fast cars, down
to the gravelly footpath
along the stony Delaware.
Did I hear someone say
"Lord, have mercy on me"
among shadows of green?
I see the two-tone pit bull,
a hefty fullback of a dog,
barrelling straight for me.
Our eyes refuse to meet
as he circles me three times
& then charges back down
the walkway to a doped-up
guy holding the chain leash,
tossing it from hand to hand.
My fists are balled up tight.
I know the dog will defend
the coward. Their silent gaze
settles on a gaggle of geese
pecking insects in the grass,
a moment between seasons.
But the dog runs up, circling
me again, & back to its owner.
I could say a swarm of words
as early evening slants to five
o'clock. The dog's sole master
kisses him when I walk past,
headed to the stone lookout
where I'll stand, softly calling
to gone ones, as I count shad
in the slow river's darkling glow.

—Yusef Komunyakaa

She says that love doesn't come naturally yet talks about it extensively, mostly in connection with her husband, David, but also to describe her feelings toward her mother, her father, her sister, and a ferret named Baby. "I'm not interested in morals," she announces on the first page; a few chapters later, she says that she set a rule of "NO HURTING ANYBODY" as a teen-ager.

These contradictions sit at the heart of Gagne's memoir. She craves diagnosis and uses clinical labels as a framework for self-understanding. But the fit is always awkward, and the implications are disheartening. "I don't want to feel like things like relationships and love and family are out of reach just because I don't 'internalize emotions' the same way everybody else does," she says at one point. Confronted with the failure of existing schemes to explain her distress, she sees not a broken system but a space for a new diagnosis of her own devising: "sociopathic spectrum disorder." To be named is to be acknowledged, to be situated in a natural order.

If Gagne's sociopathy falls outside *DSM* diagnoses, borderline personality disorder cuts across them. A condition of volatility, B.P.D. is defined by sudden swings in mood, self-image, and perceptions of others. Patients with B.P.D. tend to have intense, unstable relationships and often describe an agonizingly raw sensitivity. The psychologist Marsha Linehan has compared B.P.D. to a psychological third-degree burn: "Even the slightest touch or movement can create immense suffering."

B.P.D.'s nebulous nature is encoded in its name. The concept is generally attributed to the psychoanalyst Adolph Stern, who used it in 1937 to describe patients who were neither neurotic nor psychotic and thus "borderline." The committee charged with designing measures for personality disorders for the *DSM-III* discussed its confusing status when debating its inclusion. Some members noted that key symptoms such as identity disturbance, outbursts of anger, and unstable interpersonal relations also featured in narcissistic and histrionic personality disorders. During the internal deliberations, Donald Klein, then a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, complained that "every conceivable variety of character disorder has been described as borderline at one time or another." In "Personality Disorders: A Short History of Narcissistic, Borderline, Antisocial, and Other Types" (2023), Allan Horwitz, the medical sociologist, asks why the *DSM* still treats B.P.D. as a disorder of personality rather than of mood. "Its trademark indicator—emotional dysregulation—is virtually the opposite of the rigidity that characterizes a PD," he writes.

Alexander Kriss, in "Borderline: The Biography of a Personality Disorder," embraces this categorical quagmire. A psychotherapist and a professor of psychology at Fordham University, Kriss takes an expansive view of B.P.D., finding traces of it in Hippocratic writings about hysteria, early-modern accusations of witchcraft, and a range of diagnostic categories, including complex P.T.S.D. His book is eerie, lyrical, and erudite—fitting for a man who, as we learn, switched to clinical psychology from playwriting, and who seems more interested in Freudian theories than in modern psychiatric constructs. He prefers not to make declarative statements about the nature of B.P.D., choosing, instead, to study it through others' attempts to name, treat, and demonize psychological instability.

He's openly contemptuous of the

DSM. By distancing itself from its psychoanalytic roots, he says, the manual abandoned useful insights about etiology and treatment, and about psychological mechanisms like splitting and projection. He also condemns its "categorical approach to illness," which he thinks poorly represents reality. "A disease was a disease because the book said it was disease," he writes, comparing the *DSM's* institutional authority to religious scripture. "Perhaps it is time to reject the naming of things once and for all," he suggests at one point. "To at least consider the possibility of leaving the world of categories behind."

Kriss recognizes how the process of labelling reifies categories, especially in the age of the Internet. Online communities such as the subreddit r/BPD crystallize psychiatric tags into identities to be socially accommodated and invite people to diagnose themselves. Such communities, Kriss fears, can "pervert" B.P.D. into a self-serving justification for misconduct. He cites the musician Abby Weems's post about her relationship with the podcaster Dustin Marshall: "He made it so easy to rationalize his behavior, telling me 'that's just what happens when someone has BPD.' His personality disorder made up so much of his identity that any abusive behavior fell under the umbrella of his condition."

What's more striking is that Kriss, for all his misgivings, doesn't just diagnose patients as having the disorder; he also advertises himself as someone who specializes in B.P.D. The market demands it, he says. You need to be known for knowing something, and people presumably look up therapists proficient with existing *DSM* labels. "Even as I was discovering that being borderline was not so 'special,' that it was common and somehow related to the human condition, including my own, I wanted people to see me as an expert," he reflects. Despite his exceptional resistance to the *DSM*, Kriss, like his patients, finds himself inhabiting its categories.

If the existing taxonomy is such a mess, what would a better diagnostic system look like? In 2015, following the disappointment that greeted the release of the *DSM-5*, three psychologists formed a consortium to build one. Two of them, David Watson and Robert Krueger, had been involved in the revision of the *DSM*; a third, Roman Kotov, was a young researcher who sensed that the profession would be grateful for a different system. Two years later, they and thirty-seven other researchers, including Steven Hyman, the former N.I.M.H. director, published a proposal for a new approach to classifying mental illness. They called it the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology, or HiTOP.

The taxonomy sets aside existing diagnoses and starts by asking what goes with what. Symptoms and traits that occur together constitute syndromes, and so on, up the hierarchy, giving rise to "subfactors," "spectra," and "super-spectra." Everything is measured continuously; the taxonomy consists of dimensions rather than categories. The result is a provisional scheme of up to six spectra, including "internalizing," which covers symptoms of anxiety and depression; "externalizing," which splits into disinhibition and antagonism; and "thought disorder," which encompasses psychotic and some bipolar symptoms.

The creators of HiTOP claim that it overcomes some of the biggest issues of the *DSM:* It embraces continua rather than black-and-white entities; it avoids the wild heterogeneity of some disorders; it results in fewer patients like Gagne, who experience dysfunction yet struggle to meet the criteria for any disorder. They also say that it fits better with findings from the fields of genetics and neuroscience. HiTOP has garnered an enormous amount of excitement. In just seven years, the article presenting the system has been cited nearly three thousand times. The consortium, meanwhile, has expanded more than fourfold.

As the hype has grown, so has criticism. Detractors argue that a taxonomy designed using superficial commonalities is still a long way from mapping the nature of psychopathology. They also point out that HiTOP draws partly from self-reports of symptoms, which can be unreliable, and suggest that, whatever its lofty claims, it has replaced one set of abstractions with another.

Yet there's a broader issue here. People's symptoms frequently evolve according to the labels they've been given. Following Layle's visit to the psychiatrist, her mother observed, "You've been acting more and more autistic since we got the diagnosis." Layle took the comment as a sign that her mom didn't understand her—"I hate it when someone thinks I'm a liar," she writes—but people everywhere encounter models of illness that they unconsciously embody. Some instances are subtle; others are dramatic and startling. In 2006, a student at a Mexican boarding school developed devastating leg pain and had trouble walking; soon hundreds of classmates were afflicted. A fifteenth-century German nun started biting her companions; eventually, the strange hysteria infected convents from Holland to Italy. Ian Hacking, the philosopher, argued that such a dynamic fuelled the epidemic of multiple personality disorder in the late twentieth century, and something similar seems to be playing out now with the growing portrayal of dissociative identity disorder, the current name for M.P.D., on social media. One of Kriss's patients, a student who went by Haku, developed a multiplicity of selves after being introduced to the concept of dissociative identity disorder. "It's not that I thought he was faking it," Kriss recalls. "It seemed more that Haku *wanted* to have multiple personalities, even if that meant he had to force himself and others to believe in it."

Any new psychiatric taxonomy develops in the shadow of the old. It must contend with the echoes of the previous scheme, with people whose selves have been cast in the shape of their former classification. By failing to take these into account, models such as HiTOP risk re-creating the categories of their predecessors. Psychiatric diagnosis, wrapped in scientific authority and tinged with essentialist undertones, offers a potent script. As Layle wondered after she was told about her autism, "How did I know what was truly me, and what I had convinced myself I was?" ♦

ARROW RETRIEVER

BY JACK HANDEY

I am an arrow retriever. After a battle, it's my job to retrieve arrows. Arrows are costly and time-consuming to make. It seems like a terrible waste—and maybe even a sin—for an arrow to fall to the ground without hitting someone. Even if the arrow kills somebody, it can be reused to kill someone else. As Randolf the Scot famously said, "Arrows don't grow on trees."

I have retrieved thousands of arrows from battlefields and, along the way, made some good friends. I have gathered arrows that were loose on the ground, pulled them from dead soldiers and horses, and even removed one from a mouse. (The mouse lived!)

My father, a rich landowner, didn't want me to become an arrow retriever. He wanted me to become a barrister. I thought he meant "bannister." "I don't want children sliding down on me!" I would yell. Finally, he relented and hired me an arrow-retrieval tutor.

When I finished my studies, I thought I knew everything there was to know about arrow retrieval. But I was young and naïve. I soon came to realize that finding an arrow on the battlefield is very different from finding one on a manicured lawn, with a servant pointing at it. And pulling an arrow out of a month-old corpse, provided by grave robbers, is much easier than pulling one out of a burly, muscular Viking—especially if he's still alive!

Using my father's connections, I joined the army of Hendric the Pecked. I had to start out as an apprentice retriever. That meant scaling tall oak trees, where you could be hit by falling acorns, or wading into bogs, where you could be bitten by salamanders.

I was mentored by Snake-Eye. That's right, *the* Snake-Eye. He was the most famous of all the arrow retrievers. It was said that he once retrieved an arrow from the lair of a dragon, and as a result of that encounter his buttocks were burned to a crisp.

Snake-Eye could be a stern taskmaster. Once, when we were searching for an arrow, I had a notion. I burrowed deep into a huge haystack and emerged with the arrow. Snake-Eye's response was "You got lucky."

But he taught me many things. One thing was to look beyond the obvious. There might be an easy arrow sticking out of a dead man's belly, but when you turn him over there's often another arrow stuck in his back.

I learned that sometimes it's better to lie to royalty. When we found a prince's arrow stuck in the mud, yards from any target, we told the prince that his arrow had impaled three enemy fighters, marching single file, very close together.

Finally, I felt that I was ready to become a full-fledged arrow retriever. I petitioned my lord, Hendric the Pecked. At first, he said no, but when his wife insisted he said yes.

At the induction ceremony, I received my retriever's gloves, after being struck across the face with them the traditional three times. Hendric then declared that I should "go forth and get the shaft."

During my time as an arrow retriever, I have witnessed many things. I saw sad things, like a scarecrow that had been hit with a dozen arrows. *Why?* That scarecrow wasn't hurting anyone.

I saw funny things, like a soldier walking around with an arrow sticking through his head. It didn't seem to bother him! We laughed and laughed. (He wound up going from village to village, with the arrow still in his head, reciting humorous quips to throngs of peasants.)

And I saw acts of incredible bravery, as when a retriever picked up an arrow covered with ants, and, instead of screaming, calmly shook them off.

I have enjoyed my years as an arrow retriever. But I've come to realize that it's a young man's game. It takes a toll. First your back and elbows go, from the constant tugging. You get tinnitus, from the loud screaming. A fall can be deadly, especially if you land on an arrow sticking out of someone.

I have decided to retire and return to my father's estate. I will put my retriever's gloves, now stiff and crusty with blood, on the mantel. I will regale my little nephews and nieces with stories of the ghastly things that I have seen and done. Perhaps I will get my bannister's degree.

I will miss my fellow arrow retrievers. We had a camaraderie. Together, we endured flies and vultures and complete strangers constantly asking us for water. Some say we're heroes. But you know who the real heroes are? The men and women who clean off all the gore and entrails from the arrows, sharpen the heads, and replace the feathers, so that once again they might fly through the air and, with luck, zip in through the visor of a knight's helmet. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PORTFOLIO

A CAMPUS IN CRISIS

Dissent and defiance at Columbia's pro-Palestine protests.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA BERMAN

In the late morning of April 18th, as police amassed outside the gates of Columbia University and chants of "Free Palestine!" rang across the campus, I ran into Nina Berman, a colleague at the Journalism School, where she teaches photojournalism and I serve as dean. Nina was walking toward the east lawn, where a sign declared the area a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment." She has, for four decades, specialized in documenting precisely these types of events—labor strikes, Black Lives Matter protests, reproductive-rights rallies—though usually at a slightly greater remove from her place of employment.

A bit of context: Just before dawn on the seventeenth, dozens of students had fanned out across the east lawn to demand that the university curtail investments in companies with ties to Israel. The campus lawns had been an area of contention since the week following October 7th, when duelling gatherings in support of Israelis and Palestinians began cropping up. So it was not uncommon to see the Palestinian flag unfurled in front of the nearby Butler Library. But the protests intensified that morning, when students erected tents and hung a sign reading "Liberated Zone." The same day, Minouche Shafik, Columbia's new president, was in Washington, D.C., testifying about antisemitism at the university before a House committee. After the hearing, Shafik was confronted with another challenge: how to respond to the encampment that now filled the entire east lawn. She ultimately called in the N.Y.P.D., which arrested more than a hundred students. Soon, protesters erected their tents again. I subsequently spent ten days as part of an administration team trying to negotiate a peaceful end to the encampment. On April 30th, after similar demonstrations began to take hold at college and university campuses across the country, a contingent of protesters occupied Hamilton Hall—an academic building—until, once more, the police were called in. That night, they took back the building, removed the encampment, and made a hundred and nine arrests.

Every day since the start of the encampment, Nina has come to campus with her camera, positioned herself inconspicuously in the crowd, and captured slices of this fraught and fractured moment in our history. They are startling images that will stay with me: the pensive gaze of a protester whose face is obscured by a keffiyeh, which has become both a symbol of solidarity with Gaza and a practical means of masking one's identity to avoid doxing. A student adds to a clutch of miniature Israeli flags planted in the grass. Two opposing protesters—one holding an Israeli flag, one in a keffiyeh—engage in a heated discussion.

It already seems clear that April, 2024, will be an important chapter in the university's tradition of springtime dissent. In April, 1985, several hundred students gathered to demand that Columbia divest from companies doing business with apartheid South Africa. In April, 1968, rallies against the Vietnam War culminated in a particularly violent police raid, and gave the administration a seeming aversion to allowing the N.Y.P.D. onto the campus. But now, half a century later, the police have been summoned again. We will eventually return to some form of equilibrium, and the community will seek to better understand what has happened here, and why. One source of memory and understanding will be the images that Nina Berman has gathered, one five-hundredth of a second at a time.

—Jelani Cobb

Previous spread: On April 17th, students rallied at a pro-Palestine encampment set up that day. Right: Tents were pitched outside Butler Library, at the center of campus.

April 18th: *The public intellectual Cornel West addressed a crowd shortly after the college administration summoned the N.Y.P.D.*

He called the school's response "a colossal failure in terms of morality."

April 25th: *A student added to a clutch of Israeli flags planted along the main college walk. Behind her were the encampment and*

posters calling for the release of Hamas's hostages.

April 18th: *A day after the encampment was established, the administration called the police, who dismantled it and arrested more*

than a hundred students. Tents soon sprang up again.

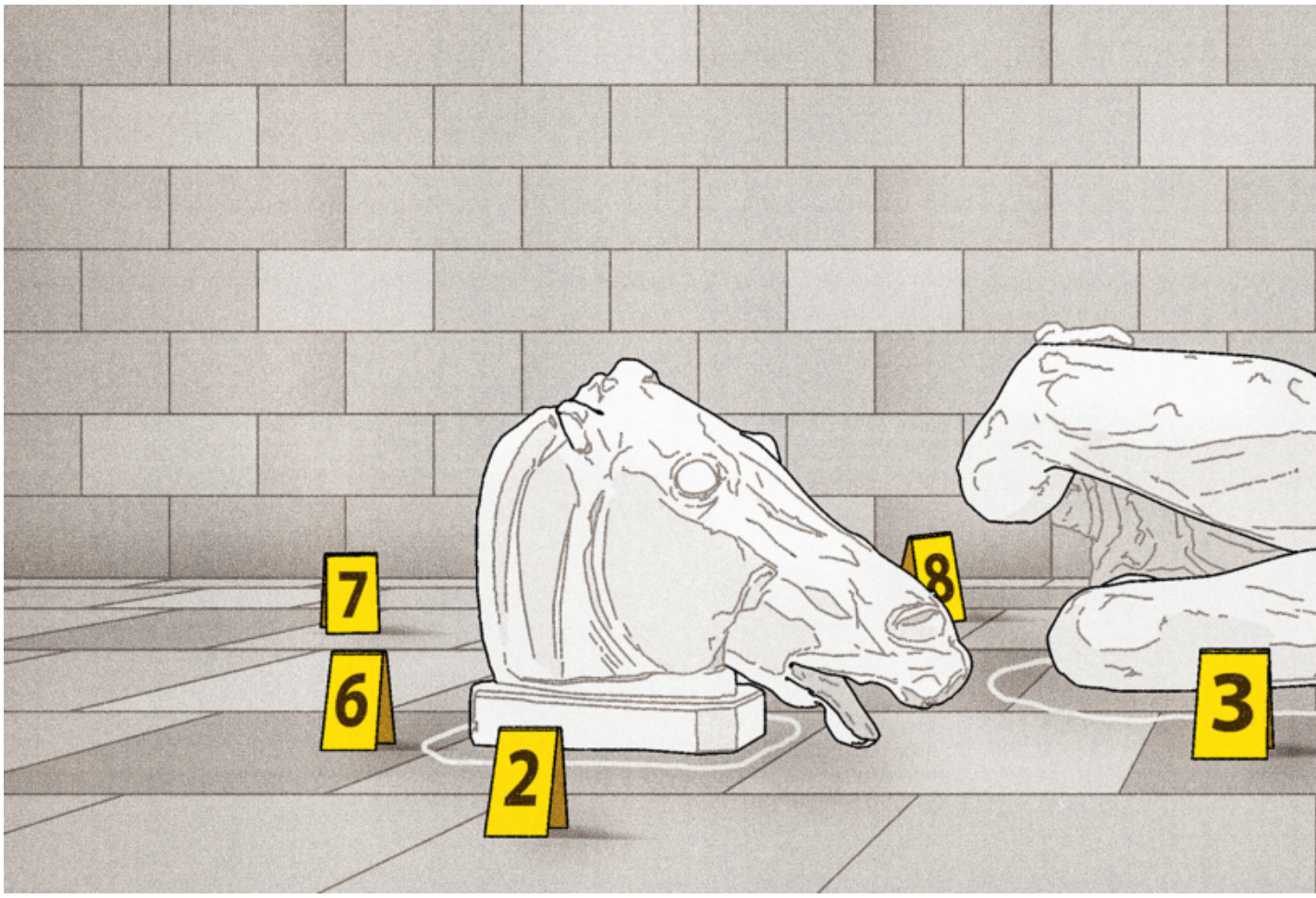
April 25th: *Near campus, where people unaffiliated with Columbia held a rally, protesters faced off.*

April 30th: *Hamilton Hall, which was taken over in 1968 by students protesting the Vietnam War. On the early morning*

of the thirtieth, protesters occupied the building. Administrators called the police again later that day.

April 30th: *N.Y.P.D. officers arrested protesters and dismantled the encampment. In the weeks since Columbia's encampment*

was established, similar ones have been erected at dozens of universities across the U.S.



LETTER FROM THE U.K.

STONES OF CONTENTION

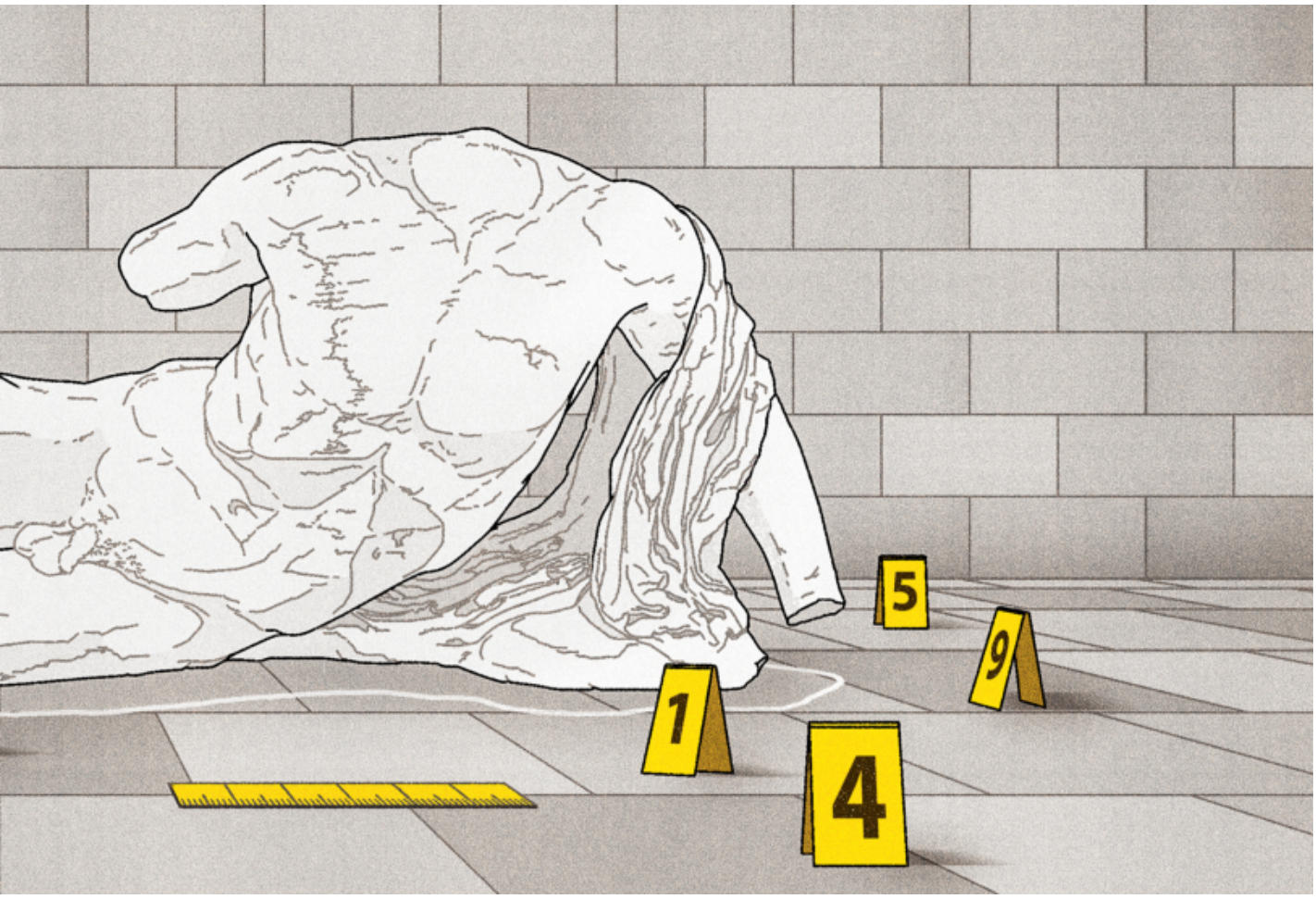
The British Museum faces accusations of cultural theft—and actual theft.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Charles Townley, one of Britain's first great collectors of antiquities, was born in Lancashire in 1737. A distaff descendant of the aristocratic Howard family, he was educated mostly in France—a common path for a well-born Catholic Englishman. Elegant and intelligent, Townley was, according to an early biographical sketch, eagerly welcomed into Continental society, "from the dissipations of which it would be incorrect to say that he wholly escaped." As a young adult, he returned to England and installed himself at the family estate, having come into a lavish inheritance. But before long he set off for Italy, in what would be the first of three visits. In a dozen years, he amassed more than two hundred ancient sculptures, along with other objects.

It was a good moment for a man of means to build such a collection. Many Italian nobles were seeing their fortunes dwindle, and could be persuaded to part with inherited objects for the right price. In Naples, Townley bought from the Principe di Laurenzano a Roman bust of a young woman with downcast eyes, identified as the nymph Clytie. (Later, Townley humorously referred to Clytie as his wife, though he was not the marrying kind.) Excavations were then under way at Hadrian's Villa, the retreat that the Emperor had built outside Rome, and collectors raced to buy art works as soon as they were removed from the ground. An élite dealer named Thomas Jenkins, who kept a place on the Via del Corso for displaying ancient wares, sold Townley, among other objects, a statue of a naked, muscled discus thrower. From the seventeen-eighties onward, Townley showed off his collection in his London town house, near St. James's Park. A painting by Johan Zoffany, first exhibited under the title "A Nobleman's Collection," depicts Townley and several friends in a library crammed with dozens of marbles, including a seven-foot Venus on a pedestal—her arm raised and

The museum has been quietly negotiating over a way to allow the Parthenon Sculptures to be sent, in some fashion, to Greece.



her draperies lowered. In the background are wooden cabinets in which Townley presumably housed smaller treasures, including countless cameos and intaglios.

Townley's museum was said to rank below only a handful of other private collections in Europe in breadth and quality. According to Max Bryant, the author of a 2017 monograph on Townley and his house, the collection also reflected "an eighteenth-century attitude to art that itself has become lost to modernity." At the time, ancient sculptures were typically restored right after being excavated—often boldly. Scholars have concluded that Clytie's bosom was enhanced to accentuate the bust's erotic charge; Townley's discobolus, unearthed in a state of decapitation, was fitted with a head from a different sculpture.

In 1791, Townley was made a trustee of the British Museum. The first national public museum, it was established by an act of Parliament, in 1753, and was initially formed around the collection of Hans Sloane, an Anglo-Irish physician and businessman. When Townley died, in 1805, the museum acquired his sculptures for the then considerable sum of twenty thousand pounds, and a gallery showcasing them opened three years later.

But Townley's collection was soon decisively eclipsed. By 1810, aficionados of ancient sculpture had begun clamoring to see a different cache of ancient marbles, which was being housed in a shed in Mayfair. One young artist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, wrote, of seeing the works, "I felt as if a divine truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind, and I knew that they would at last rouse the art of Europe from its slumber in the darkness." These sculptures came not from Italy but from Ottoman-occupied Athens, where they had been pried from, or otherwise collected around, the ruins of the Parthenon, at the instruction of Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin.

In 1799, Lord Elgin, a Scottish nobleman thirty-odd years Townley's junior, arrived in Constantinople as Britain's Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. The project of removing the marbles from the Parthenon, the fifth-century temple on the Acropolis, and shipping them to Britain took more than a decade—about half of the original five-hundred-and-twenty-four-foot frieze was removed, as were a number of life-size statues from the pediments. Elgin originally intended to install all of it at Broomhall, his ancestral home, northwest of Edinburgh. But he ran into financial difficulties, and in 1816 the Parthenon marbles, plus dozens of other sculptures from the Acropolis, were acquired from Elgin by Parliament for the British Museum. The price, thirty-five thousand pounds, was set by comparison with the Townley collection, but the esteemed sculptor Joseph Nollekens declared, "I reckon them very much higher than the Townley marbles for beauty."

The arrival in Britain of what became known as the Elgin Marbles encouraged an appreciation of the aesthetics and craftsmanship of the ancient Greeks over their later Roman copyists. The display of the marbles—eventually, in a custom-built gallery considerably larger than the one featuring Townley's collection—also helped establish the practice of leaving

ILLUSTRATION BY ÁLVARO BERNIS

"Any other weaknesses?"

• •

fragmentary statues unrestored. Although the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles was controversial from the start (Lord Byron decried their removal from the Acropolis as vandalism), the sculptures' significance was immediately acknowledged. They were so prized, in fact, that soon after Greece became an independent state, in 1830, it demanded the statues back—a request that British diplomats have consistently rejected.

Over time, the reputation of Townley's marbles steadily declined. The gallery dedicated to his collection was demolished in 1841, during an expansion of the museum, and many sculptures that he'd acquired migrated to storerooms. Already hidden away were the cameos, intaglios, and other small items from his collection, which had been acquired from his heir in 1814. Many of these objects had not been thoroughly documented, and this meant that when some of them started disappearing nobody even noticed that they were gone.

In the past year or so, the British Museum has been wrestling—often in public, and often to its considerable embarrassment—with what might be characterized as the twin legacies of Townley and Elgin. In late 2022, reports emerged that the chair of the museum's trustees, George Osborne, was in negotiations with the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and that a deal might be struck to allow the Parthenon Sculptures, as they are now commonly called, to be sent, in some fashion, to Greece. Many Britons have long favored resolving the diplomatic stalemate; others branded the notion outrageous. Soon after Osborne became chair, a headline in the *Daily Express* warned, "DON'T LET BRITISH MUSEUM OR ELGIN MARBLES BE CAUGHT BY WOKE IDEOLOGY." Not long afterward, the museum was jolted by scandal when it was revealed that hundreds of objects—including cameos and intaglios once owned by Townley—had been stolen, and some of them sold off, over a period of many years, apparently by a member of the museum's own curatorial staff. The *Daily Mail* contributed a typically lurid summation: "HUNT FOR PRICELESS GEMS STOLEN IN NETFLIX-STYLE HEIST."

The sensational headlines were somewhat misleading: in the context of ancient archeology, the term "gem" typically refers not to diamonds or rubies but to engraved semiprecious stones or objects cast from glass. Enlightenment-era connoisseurs such as Townley sometimes bought the less valuable of these objects by the handful. (Cameos are carved in raised relief, intaglios in negative relief.) Their ancient owners prized them as miniature works of art. According to Martin Henig, a senior academic visitor at the University of Oxford's School of Archaeology, Roman emperors appear to have given cameos, which were conveniently portable, as tributes or gifts to secure political alliances. Even quite ordinary people might aspire to own a glass gem, set in a signet ring, depicting a god or a mythological figure of personal significance. A glass gem discovered at a Roman fortress near the city of Oxford features a horse and a cornet, suggesting that its owner was a horn-playing member of the cavalry. Henig told me, "The best of the cameos, and the best of the intaglios, were probably much more highly valued than sculptures," which were often mass-produced in workshops. The designs of such artists as Dioskourides, a gem engraver who worked for Emperor Augustus, were extremely coveted. Today, the most prized gems can sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. For scholars, the importance of the gems lies not just in their beauty but also in the light their iconography sheds on ancient concerns and preoccupations.

The uproar over the Townley thefts and the controversy over the Elgin discussions mean that the British Museum has been in the headlines to an unusual extent for a cultural institution, even one that was last year's most visited tourist attraction in London. But it was inevitable that the British Museum would become the focus of scrutiny. The museum, a repository of more than eight million artifacts from around the world, most of them acquired during Britain's reign as an imperial overlord, holds not just classical sculptures but also Anglo-Saxon weapons, Chinese ceramics, Assyrian wall panels, and the Rosetta Stone. Along with similar institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, the British Museum has increasingly faced ethical questions about how it amassed its collection. In addition to being petitioned by the Greeks, the British Museum is being challenged for its holding of bronzes looted in the

late nineteenth century by British forces from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, in what is now southern Nigeria. Restitution claims have also been made regarding sacred objects from Ethiopia.

The Townley thefts were facilitated by the fact that curators had never fully recorded many of the objects in internal catalogues or databases. Indeed, it was reported that individual records for some 2.4 million items at the British Museum were lacking, calling into question its long-standing, and sometimes arrogantly expressed, claim to be an unimpeachable custodian for vulnerable artifacts. For some observers, it was an irresistible irony that actual thefts had occurred at an institution long accused of cultural theft. When a British TV channel asked viewers to contribute ideas for end-of-year jokes, the museum was the butt of the winning entry: "Did you hear about the Christmas cake on display in the British Museum? It was Stollen."

The British Museum has never been merely a trove of exquisite art works. It was also intended, through the depths of its holdings, to be an archive of the world—a library of things. It was established by eighteenth-century polymaths as an expression of the Enlightenment conviction that universal truths might be arrived at through intellectual inquiry and scientific reason. The museum's wildly disparate collections could never be compiled today, which is both the institution's strength and its point of weakness. Why should the sarcophagi of Egyptian kings or the fragments of ancient Greek architecture be housed in London, and claimed in some sense as British? Townley, Elgin, and the other men whose acquisitions filled the institution's galleries would not have thought of such questions; today they are, rightly, unavoidable. At a certain point in a museum's history, it becomes more than just a repository of the cultural and artistic past, telling a story about the history of a nation, or a people, or the world. It also becomes a museum of itself—of its formation, its collecting history, its priorities, and its failings.

The British Museum's painful self-examination might never have occurred had it not been for the persistence of Ittai Gradel, a Danish dealer and collector of antiquities. Gradel does not hunt for discoveries in the excavated ruins of palaces and temples, as his eighteenth-century predecessors did. Instead, he has often sifted through that twenty-first-century site of buried treasure—eBay. He has worked at universities in Denmark and in the U.K., and has a special interest in ancient cameos and intaglios. But he was not suited to academic life, seeing himself more in the lineage of gentleman collectors who combined scholarship and connoisseurship with the thrill of discovery.

A few years ago, Gradel paid two thousand euros to a German auction house for what was described online as a group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cameos. He later confirmed what he had suspected immediately on examining a photograph of one of the pieces: it was an ancient Roman cameo of Germanicus Caesar which Johann Winckelmann—the German scholar who is considered the father of Western art history—had described as one of the finest examples he'd ever seen. The cameo's whereabouts had been unknown for more than two hundred years. Gradel told me recently, "What I am looking out for is the mistakes, and the stupidity, of other dealers and auction houses. That is where the bargains are."

More than a dozen years ago, Gradel was offered a reserve of glass and stone gems from another dealer. The objects purportedly came from an estate sale conducted in the North of England in the early twentieth century. Between 2010 and 2013, Gradel bought almost three hundred of them. He sold a few and kept the rest. The gems were of such

quality and quantity that he assumed they were part of an old aristocratic collection gathered on a Grand Tour; he had a hunch that they might have once belonged to the Howard family, whose estate, in North Yorkshire, is now known for its prominent appearance in the 1981 adaptation of "Brideshead Revisited." The family had sold some precious-stone gems to the British Museum in the Victorian era, and Gradel theorized that these less valuable glass gems may have been sold off around the same time. Looking for information about a possible Howard connection, he sent inquiries to curators in the British Museum's Department of Greece and Rome, but received no response. Meanwhile, Gradel told me, "more and more of these gems kept turning up—the vender would say these were the last, and then he would open another drawer, and there were some more gems. I concluded, frankly, that he was elderly and a bit dotty." After 2011, the supply began to dwindle, and Gradel was informed that the seller, whose name was Paul Higgins, had died.

Not long afterward, similar gems started appearing on eBay. Gradel made inquiries about the origins of these items, and the seller said that he'd inherited them from his grandfather Frank Nicholls, an antique-shop owner in York, who had died in 1953. Gradel checked the grandfather's name against records available online; the details aligned, except that Nicholls's year of death was actually 1952. It was the kind of mistake, Gradel figured, that could easily happen when information was passed down through a family. But he noticed something peculiar: this seller's name was also Paul Higgins. "I eventually asked him specifically if he was related to this first Paul Higgins, who was now deceased, from whom I had bought a lot of similar gems some years before," Gradel recalled. "He replied, 'He's no relation of mine. But I agree it's an odd coincidence.'"

This Higgins seemed ignorant of the value of what he had, sometimes asking only forty or fifty pounds for objects that Gradel could tell were worth far more, possibly as much as several thousand pounds. Sometimes he felt moved to enlighten the seller about the true value of his wares. Gradel spent a hundred and fifty pounds on a ring that he felt, based on the seller's photograph, was so well preserved it had to be a fake—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imitations of ancient gems had proliferated among collectors. But when the ring arrived he was amazed to discover that it was original, dating from the third century B.C. "So I wrote to him and said, 'I made a mistake. Now I have it in hand, I realize it is the real deal,'" Gradel told

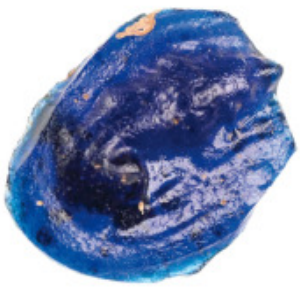
me. He offered to return it, or to pay an additional five hundred pounds. The seller accepted the cash. "You can say that was jolly decent of me," Gradel explained. "But it was also, of course, because I wanted to be in his good books. If he had more items in his drawers, I would like for him to come to me first."

After Gradel bought a cast-glass gem from the seller, he was delighted to discover that, according to an eighteenth-century catalogue, it had once belonged to none other than Charles Townley. Gradel was a bit surprised, having believed that all of Townley's gems had gone to the British Museum. He concluded that this one must have been disposed of in some other fashion, and thought no more about it.

Then, in 2016, something even stranger happened: the seller posted on eBay a fragment of an onyx cameo featuring a young woman in profile alongside Priapus, the god of fertility. Gradel recognized the fragment as one that had been described in a 1926 British Museum catalogue of engraved gems and cameos. The cameo, Gradel said, was not listed on the museum's Web site, however, and he still believed that the seller was acting in good faith: "Even though it was clearly a case of theft from the museum, it apparently think that the seller was hiding something: "Every bit of evidence could be innocently explained, but the sum total began to appear rather strange."

main accessible on his online account—was not Paul Higgins but Peter Higgs. In a phone conversation with a colleague in the U.K., Gradel described his confusion. "I said, 'I don't understand it, his real name is Peter Higgs, and he's been lying, and there's some trickery going on.' And my colleague said, 'You do realize, don't you, that that's the name of a curator at the British Museum?' And then all my hair stood on end." If the thief was a professional curator, then Gradel had been tricked in more ways than one: the improper valuations of some items hadn't been a sign of ignorance but, rather, a crafty way for Higgs to disguise his identity.

About a year earlier, Gradel had been offered, via a middleman, a fragment of a



A colorful array of glass gems allegedly stolen by Peter Higgs. Left to right: an intaglio of Jupiter; a cameo of a dog; a

COURTESY TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Gradel's interactions with the eBay seller, though, grew more and more perplexing. At one point, the seller listed a group of items very similar to the ones he'd said had come from his grandfather's shop, but asserted that he'd bought this cache in a junk shop. Gradel explained to me, "These types of ancient glass objects are not that common, so it would be a bit strange that he himself happened to stumble across a batch of exactly the same type. It was not impossible, but it was an uncanny coincidence." It was also weird, he thought, that the seller had bought the items in a junk shop in the first place, given his apparent ignorance of their value and provenance. But Gradel reassured himself that the seller was simply "clueless," because many of the objects "were totally misdescribed."

Except when they weren't. "Some of the objects were absolutely correctly described online as ancient," Gradel said. "That was also odd." Gradel began to in all probability had taken place many, many years ago—before his grandfather had died, in 1952." He made inquiries about buying the fragment, only to be told by the seller that he'd posted it in error: it actually belonged to his sister, who did not want to let go of it. Gradel continued to buy from the seller until 2018.

In May, 2020, Gradel was checking the British Museum's Web site when he made an alarming discovery: a photograph of the cameo fragment depicting the girl and Priapus. So it did belong to the museum. On eBay, however, the cameo's gold mount had been removed. "Clearly, the museum's photo could not possibly predate 1952—that told me the provenance story was a lie," Gradel said. "And if the seller had been lying to me about that, I could trust absolutely nothing he had told me." He went back through his records and discovered that the name on his final PayPal receipt, from 2018—the only one recent enough to re-

stone gem being sold by a retired dealer and collector, Malcolm Hay; after examining it, he had decided against buying it. Later, he had found this gem, too, listed on the British Museum's Web site, and passed word on to Hay. Gradel then learned that the gem had come from the same eBay seller with whom Gradel had done business. In the summer of 2020, Hay alerted the museum that one of its catalogued objects had been offered on the open market. He was told that the matter would be investigated. At the time, the pandemic had closed the museum to visitors, and curators were working from home. "I should have thought it was a fairly simple task of going into the strong room and checking whether the object was there," Gradel said. "But there was no urgency, because there was lockdown, and museum employees couldn't get into the museum anyway. So the thief couldn't steal anything else."

The museum reopened in August, 2020, allowing only a limited number of

visitors and staff. By early 2021, as far as Gradel knew, an inquiry into Hay's claim had not been completed, so he wrote an e-mail to the museum's deputy director, Jonathan Williams, outlining in detail the compromising information he had gleaned about three items that appeared to have been stolen from the museum: the Townley gem, the onyx cameo, and the Hay fragment. He shared what he knew about the identity of the seller, and named Peter Higgs, the British Museum curator, as the likely culprit. In the e-mail, Gradel noted with dismay that the museum had apparently left "Townley gems lying around for over 200 years without ever doing even the most cursory registration," adding, "The lack of registration would have been an open invitation to a thief, since no one would then miss them . . . and their presence in the collections could never be proven once they had left" the British Museum. There was, he declared, "no decent explanation of what I have here discovered."

Several months after Gradel wrote his letter, the British Museum announced a new chairman of its board of trustees: George Osborne, the former Conservative Party politician and the Chancellor of the Exchequer from 2010 to 2016. Osborne was born to inherited wealth and social rank—he is the heir apparent to the baronetcy of Ballentaylor and Ballylemon, an Irish title—and was best known as the architect of austerity, a policy of radical public-spending cuts initiated when the Tories took power in 2010. Austerity rendered Osborne deeply unpopular—thousands booed him when he appeared at a sporting event—and his political career was cut short in 2016, when he and Prime Minister David Cameron found themselves on the losing, pro-E.U. side of the Brexit referendum.

Many cultural observers were dismayed that a man who had inflicted harsh cuts on British cultural institutions would now help lead the country's most famous museum. But none could dispute that he was peerlessly connected in the realms of politics and finance. It was also easy to imagine that Osborne might wish to burnish a new legacy for himself.

By the time Osborne took over as chair, a major refurbishment of the museum had long been scheduled. The museum's director, Hartwig Fischer, who previously oversaw the state collections in Dresden, had been appointed, in 2016, with the forbidding mandate of creating a master plan to renovate the museum and improve its displays, allowing them to be modernized so as to show collections more coherently. Plans had also been laid for a new archeological-research facility in Reading, forty miles outside London. (It opens later this year.) The museum's trustees likely hoped that Osborne, with his ties to international finance, would be instrumental in raising the billion pounds of private money reportedly required to finance these projects.

Osborne, for his part, was eager to resolve the seemingly intractable problem of the museum's possession of the Parthenon Sculptures. Not long after being appointed to the board, he reportedly met privately in London with Prime Minister Mitsotakis. In subsequent months, the men continued their unofficial conversation, eventually arriving at the idea that some of the sculptures currently in London might be brought to Athens; reciprocally, the Greeks would lend for temporary exhibition some treasures from their museums which had rarely, if ever, left the country. (The Mask of Agamemnon, a gold funerary mask from Mycenae, now on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, was mentioned in media reports as one possibility.) The proposal fell far short of the full restitution that has long been Greece's stated aim, but interested observers expressed confidence that language could be found to avoid the inflammatory term "loan," the use of which would imply an acknowledgment—unacceptable to the Greeks—that the Parthenon Sculptures are legitimately owned by the British Museum. (One euphemism that has been considered, they said, is "deposit.")

cameo of a bearded man; an intaglio of Bacchus; an intaglio of Minerva; an intaglio of a Roman youth.

Although the Parthenon is now considered the ultimate representation of Greek national identity, when Lord Elgin arrived in Constantinople, in 1799, Athens had been under Ottoman rule for more than three hundred years. The Acropolis was then home to a jumble of buildings, including not just the ancient temple—which, for a time, had been turned into a Christian church—but also a Frankish tower and various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Turkish structures.

Lord Elgin became interested in the Parthenon Sculptures before he saw them. He commissioned several artists, including an Italian painter, Giovanni Battista Lusieri, to go to Athens to draw the marbles, hoping that such images might inspire new developments in the arts and crafts of Britain. (Elgin had considered hiring a promising young British artist for the task, but was put

off by the fee demanded; as a result, J. M. W. Turner was not sent to Greece to render the ruins.) In 1801, the governing Turkish authority apparently informed an emissary of Elgin's in Athens that fallen pieces of the temple could be excavated and removed. Once work began at the site, this permission was very liberally interpreted both by Elgin's representatives, who started cutting sculptures off the building, and by the Turkish authorities, who appear to have been bribed to ignore such actions.

According to William St. Clair's book "Lord Elgin and the Marbles," by the time Elgin first visited Athens, in 1802, many of the Parthenon Sculptures were already in packing cases, ready to be sent by sea to England. The journey was perilous. One of the ships carrying the heavy cargo sank off the Peloponnesian coast, requiring an expensive salvage job. Elgin's own return to England, in 1803, had a major disruption: he arrived in Paris just before war was declared between Britain and France, and was detained as a prisoner of war (albeit partly in a Pyrenean spa town). Some three years passed before he returned to Britain. When he did, he found himself ensnarled in a costly divorce that, together with the vast expenses he had incurred to obtain the Parthenon Sculptures, ultimately led him to sell the marbles to Britain.

The museum's accession of the marbles was always controversial, not least because any original documentation of Elgin's agreements with the Turkish authorities was lost. (Only a copy, in Italian translation, remains.) The scholar and British Museum trustee Mary Beard, in her book "The Parthenon" (2002), writes that after Greece gained independence from Ottoman rule it made a priority of highlighting its national ancestry. Part of this project was to turn the Acropolis into a monument to the fifth century B.C. by removing everything that wasn't classical from the site. Buildings erected in later eras were demolished, and shattered columns were resurrected. Beard writes that the director of excavations hailed the site as "cleansed of all barbaric additions, a noble monument to the Greek genius." For the newly established nation, the temple's symbolic potency was made all the greater by its earlier occupation and ravaging. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Greek minister in London unsuccessfully requested that the frieze fragments be returned. In 2009, Greece made another argument, this one in bricks and mortar, by opening the Acropolis Museum at the foot of the hill; it includes a top-floor gallery showcasing the sculptures that Elgin left behind, with plaster casts pointedly filling in the gaps.

The British Museum has consistently defended its ownership of the marbles, which in any case it is not permitted to just give away: according to the British Museum Act of 1963, it cannot deaccession any objects that have "become vested in the Trustees by virtue of a gift or bequest," except under limited circumstances. Elgin's initial contention to Parliament—that he had prevented the Turks from turning the sculptures into mortar—gave way, over time, to an institutional claim: that the marbles were less vulnerable in a London museum than they would have been if left exposed to the elements in Athens. (As early as the eighteen-fifties, however, concerns were raised about the effect of London's grime on the marbles.) In recent decades, people within the museum have stopped making this point so loudly, but a wall text in the museum next to a caryatid from the Erechtheion—a column from another temple on the Acropolis, sculpted in the form of a woman, that was also brought to Britain by Elgin—notes that the five caryatids that remained in situ, and are now in the Acropolis Museum, are "much corroded after nearly two more centuries of weathering."

Under the leadership of Neil MacGregor, the charismatic director of the British Museum from 2002 to 2015, the principal argument made for the sculptures' retention was that they were part of a global narrative: "the private collection of every citizen of the world," as MacGregor put it. In 2014, the museum loaned out one of its Parthenon Sculptures, a figure of the river god Ilissos, for the first time—but to the State Hermitage Museum, in Russia, not to an institution in Greece.

Others have suggested that the sculptures, having been in England for two hundred years, are now part of British history, in addition to Greek history. After Hartwig Fischer became director, he mounted the argument that moving cultural heritage from its place of origin into any museum—in London, Athens, or elsewhere—was itself a "creative act," offering a revelatory change of context. At a cosmopolitan museum, a Greek sculpture can be juxtaposed with a Persian one; the religious iconography of one culture can be readily compared with that of others. The history of the Parthenon, Fischer told a Greek newspaper, had actually been "enriched" by the fact that some parts of it "are located in Athens and some are in London, where six million people see them every year." (George Vardas, a journalist who supports the marbles' repatri-

HAIL MARY

As in Hello, which is as good as any beginning.
A pouty look, a flirty look, how should one
look? To be the queen of anything
isn't easy. What is easy? You have got this,
is frequently said. Frequently recently.
To be favored, to have grace bestowed upon
when everyone in the Book of Hours is busy
contorting themselves to make sense
of what it feels like to be in the light. You are
right, we're moving from sea to shining sea
across the stolen broken land, stricken with
a grief that knows no bounds and yet singing
and saying, "Let's wake one more day in order
to confirm that there was a moment yesterday
when we were one." That's right, all these
theatrics—for which one pays with their body.

—Mary Jo Bang

ation, scoffed, "The imperialist patronage of the British Museum has no limits.")

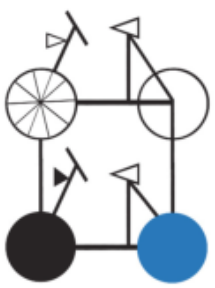
Any arrangement that would have the effect of restoring the sculptures to Greece seemed to be in conflict with the British Museum's official position. A statement by the institution's board of trustees maintains that "there's a great public benefit to seeing the sculptures within the context of the world collection of the British Museum." To advocates of retaining the sculptures, Osborne's attempted deal with Mitsotakis had the hallmark of a politician's strategy: a short-term solution that overlooks inevitable consequences. Would a Parthenon agreement cause the museum to be deluged with demands for the repatriation of other foreign treasures? And how could the institution guarantee that a sovereign nation would not violate a loan agreement? Some observers of Greek domestic politics acknowledge that there is little chance of any government there acquiescing to the marbles being shipped back to Britain.

For those who feel that the proper place of the sculptures is in Greece, though, framing a return as a "deposit" might help ease the British public into accepting the concession. Lord Vaizey, a former Conservative culture minister, is now the chair of the Parthenon Project—a group, funded by a Greek businessman named John Lefas, that has been advocating for an agreement that would result in a de-facto repatriation without explicitly calling it a Greek victory. Vaizey told me, "There's a big part of me that feels, if and when the sculptures were reunited in that setting, it would be one of those moments when people would say, almost immediately, 'Why did we wait so long?'" By early 2023, with Osborne working behind the scenes, the British Museum seemed closer than it had ever been to resolving its Elgin problem. But it was about to be overwhelmed by the consequences of Townley's neglected legacy.

After Gradel submitted his letter to Jonathan Williams, the deputy director of the British Museum, in February, 2021, he received an acknowledgment of receipt. A few months later, he prodded again, and eventually got a short message from Williams. The museum, Williams said, had conducted a thorough investigation, "which found that the objects concerned are all accounted for . . . with no suggestion of any wrong-doing on behalf of any member of Museum staff."

Gradel was incensed—if Williams was correct, how had a piece demonstrably from the museum's collection ended up on eBay? But his requests for further elucidation were rebuffed in a subsequent e-mail, in which Williams told him that his allegations were "wholly unfounded." At this point, Gradel made sure to put in writing his consequent position regarding his purchases. "As these my suspicions are, then, wholly unfounded, I have no reason whatsoever to suspect anything I bought from that Ebay seller," he wrote. "I am glad to finally leave this behind me."

But Gradel could not actually let the matter go. "I knew this was baloney, obviously," he told me. "And, also, it implied that I had made a frivolous accusation against them. I don't like having a reputation as someone who goes around bandying frivolous accusations against all and sundry." He did not feel that he could go immediately to the board of trustees, since he had so recently been shut down by the museum's administration. Nor could he approach the police with his suspicions. "I asked friends of mine, and they advised me, 'You can't do anything, because the victim of the crime you claim is the British Museum, and the injured party denies that a crime has even taken place.'" Gradel was in contact with other scholars, including Martin Henig, at Oxford. Henig told me that Gradel "was clearly upset, because the British Museum just didn't believe him."



In 2022, Gradel contacted a museum trustee, Paul Ruddock, informing him of his suspicions and of his fears that a scandal was being covered up. In fact, the museum was already concerned that its earlier assurances to Gradel had been misplaced. In August, 2021, after Gradel wrote to Williams, a spot check of the Department of Greece and Rome had been conducted, revealing "an item not in its proper location within the Greece and Rome strongroom," according to a later statement by the museum. In April, 2022, staffers launched a more extensive audit of the department's holdings and discovered that approximately two thousand objects were missing or damaged—in particular, cameos and intaglios. It appeared that the thief had tried to cover his tracks by altering digital databases; a recent civil filing alleges that Higgs made more than eighty edits "related to stolen, partially stolen or damaged items," and that there was "no legitimate reason" for this activity. He is also suspected of having inserted into a museum catalogue a forged handwritten note falsely suggesting that in 1963 the museum lost the stone fragment that was acquired decades later by Malcolm Hay. (Higgs seems to have sold it in 2015.) Around the end of 2022, the police were discreetly called in.

Items going missing within museums, or being stolen from them, is hardly unheard of, and the British Museum had experienced high-profile thefts before. In 1993, robbers broke into the museum through the roof and made off with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of Roman coins and jewelry. In 2002, a visitor lifted a twenty-five-hundred-year-old Greek head from a closed gallery. Two years later, fifteen items of medieval Chinese jewelry were stolen. Museums are vulnerable to theft from insiders, too. In a notorious case from the nineteen-fifties, John Nevin, an assistant at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, was prosecuted for stealing some two thousand items, including a table that he was thought to have smuggled out by hiding its legs down his pants. He had furnished his modest home with the loot, and was later sentenced to three years in prison. "Taking the things became an obsession as I was attracted by the beauty of them," he reportedly confessed. In 2002, the London *Sunday Times* sent an undercover journalist to the British Museum's Department of Greece and Rome to pose as a work trainee; the security was so lax that the reporter was able to smuggle an ancient Greek statue of a foot out of the gallery and past guards without being caught.

What was especially shocking about the gem thefts, when they were eventually made public, in August, 2023, was the seniority of the apparent culprit: Higgs, who was fired that month,

had worked at the museum for three decades. Curators at the British Museum are highly qualified but not especially well paid: a salary of around fifty thousand dollars for an experienced curator is not unusual. The rewards of the job are not entirely monetary; many curators have dedicated their lives to a narrow specialization and have a profound commitment to the objects in their care. The idea that a curator may have not just stolen objects but actively damaged them by removing gold settings—presumably to sell the parts separately—appalled former colleagues.

Ironically, Higgs had been liberally quoted in the *Sunday Times* exposé about the museum's weak security. "It's chaos down here," he told the newspaper. In 2021, he was made acting keeper for the Greek and Roman collections, though he did not end up getting the permanent job; other recent duties included curating one of the museum's touring exhibitions, "Ancient Greeks: Athletes, Warriors and Heroes," which travelled to Australia in 2021 and later to the Suzhou Museum, in China.

According to the recent civil filing, Higgs has "indicated that he intends to dispute the Claim but his Defence provides no particulars of that denial." No formal charges have yet been brought against him. He did not answer my requests to talk to him. The filing indicates that he has been unable to respond effectively to the proceedings because of "severe mental strain."

But in December, 2021, to promote the "Ancient Greeks" exhibition, he gave a lively interview to the Sydney *Morning Herald*, in which he recounted that his formative exposure to the arts of antiquity had been through a great-uncle who ran a fish-and-chips shop in the North of England, and whose garden featured a marble copy of the Laocoön. Now in the Vatican Museums, the Laocoön is the most famous sculpture of antiquity, showing the priest of Apollo and his two sons struggling with a pair of flesh-eating snakes. Higgs said of the copy, "I climbed all over it, and I absolutely loved it. And it must have gotten into my head." One of his favorite items in the "Ancient Greeks" show, Higgs revealed, was an exquisitely engraved chalcedony gem, barely the size of a postage stamp. It depicted Nike, the goddess of war, her draperies falling off her body as she piles up arms and armor seized in battle. Higgs told the paper that the gem, which was acquired by the British Museum in 1865, is "one of the finest examples that I've seen in the world." It is also the kind of thing that Charles Townley would have delighted in.

Late last year, the annual dinner of the trustees of the British Museum was held, for the first time in anyone's memory, in the Duveen Gallery, where the Parthenon sculptures are displayed. Tables were laid out for wealthy donors and eminent guests from the worlds of politics and culture. In a speech, Osborne made forthright reference to his negotiations with the Greek Prime Minister, and to his hope for an "agreement that enables these great sculptures to be seen in Athens as well as London." Osborne also spoke of the thefts. "We can't pretend it didn't happen, or it doesn't matter, or that some years ago we weren't warned," he said. "It was our duty to look after these objects, and we failed in that duty."

In late July, shortly before the public revelation of the thefts, the museum had announced that Hartwig Fischer would be ending his term as director in 2024, but would stay in the job while the search for a successor was under way. A month later, in the wake of revelations of the museum's failure to heed Gradel's warning, Fischer tendered his immediate resignation. "The responsibility for that failure must ultimately rest with the director," Fischer said. He recently sent me this comment: "The functioning of a museum requires the probity of its staff. That any member of staff would breach this rule, steal, and damage a public good, is shocking." The museum, he noted, "is an organisation with a deep sense of responsibility for the artefacts in its custody. Clearly, it was upsetting for all to see this abused by an individual whom we trusted."

In mid-December the museum published an account of the findings of an internal review, which announced the forthcoming documentation and digitization of the entire collection, in order to "eliminate any pockets of unregistered objects." (About half of the collection has been fully digitized to date.) The report also provided a few sketchy details about the ongoing quest to find what had been lost, revealing that, of the two thousand or so missing or damaged objects, only about three hundred and fifty had so far been recovered—the majority of them with the assistance of Gradel. Jonathan Williams, the deputy director who had brushed Gradel off when he first raised alarms, resigned at the end of the year. In March, Nicholas Cullinan, the head of the National Portrait Gallery, who has been much praised for the renovation of that institution, was named as Fischer's replacement. He will take up the post this summer.

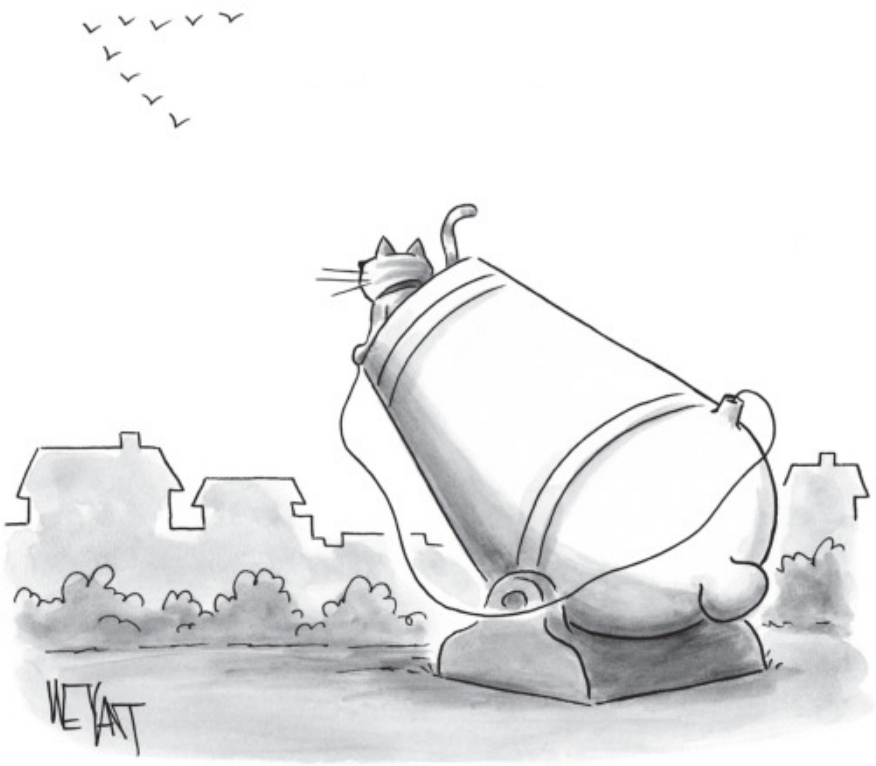
For some people associated with the British Museum, the recent tumult made the larger questions of purpose that hallowed museums are facing only more pressing. Mary Beard, speaking in her personal capacity, rather than as a trustee of the museum, told me, "You have to think, How do we share, and do we want to share, the heritage of world culture? And how do we share it outside of the conventional hubs of cultural ownership: Western European capitals and the places where objects came from?" Museums should be thinking about what they will look like fifty years or a hundred years from now, Beard went on. "With something like the Parthenon marbles—this is Beard fantasy, but I like the idea of them going to Mumbai or Auckland," she said. "What do we mean when we talk of our 'shared heritage of Hellenism'? It goes far beyond London, Paris, New York, and Athens."

No new developments in the Parthenon-marbles discussions have been reported in recent months. Lord Vaizey told me, "Unfortunately, standing on top of a stepladder to change a light bulb and still being a foot away from the socket—to change the light bulb is impossible." Nevertheless, the prospect of the marbles making a return of some sort to Athens seems likelier than it has for two hundred years. Recently, the Metropolitan Museum has put on display, for at least the next decade, an exhibit of Cycladic objects privately collected by the American businessman Leonard Stern. An international deal was struck to avoid possible legal challenges to the collection's provenance. The wall text of the installation, which was arranged in agreement with the Museum of Cycladic Art, in Athens, and with the Greek government, notes that everything on display is now considered the property of

Greece. Prime Minister Mitsotakis heralded the negotiations, which took place over two years, as a paradigm for dealing with contentious issues of patrimony. "Given that the evidentiary procedures for any judicial claim around cultural property is in most cases very difficult, expensive, and cumbersome, a more pragmatic approach is often the more practical approach," he said. In November, the beleaguered British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak huffily cancelled a meeting with Mitsotakis after his Greek counterpart told an interviewer that dividing the Parthenon Sculptures was like cutting the Mona Lisa in half. In spite of this, Mitsotakis later said, "I believe both parties have the vision to see beyond past division to embrace a new win-win era of partnership."

For the time being, a visitor to the British Museum can still behold the Parthenon Sculptures—perhaps after weaving through the Greek and Roman galleries, where some years ago a clumsy waiter at a function accidentally knocked a thumb off the hand of Charles Townley's scantily clad Venus. Or one can make a detour through the thematic Enlightenment Gallery, where Townley's discobolus is displayed not far from the seductive Clytie, who stands on a pedestal a few feet from a bust of Townley himself, looking dashing in an open-necked ruffled shirt. Until June, a visitor can even dip into a room near the museum's entrance to visit a small exhibition titled "Rediscovering Gems," which showcases a handful of the glass gems that Higgs allegedly stole from the Townley collection, along with other cameos and intaglios that illustrate why these long-overlooked objects exerted such a fascination during the era of the museum's founding.

I stopped by the exhibition recently, and saw that one of Townley's desktop cabinets was on display. Several of its drawers were open to reveal rows of lozenge-shaped glass gems in shades of blue and purple, alternating with casts in shades of pink and red, all ringed with gold-colored bands. They looked inviting and almost edible, like the wares of a high-end confectionery shop. In a backlit case, ten of the recovered gems were displayed, none bigger than a fingernail. I squinted at them through a magnifying glass. There was a glass cameo of a fat-cheeked Cupid, from which part of a wing had broken off, and a glass intaglio that showed Jupiter in the form of an eagle abducting Ganymede; described in a label as a "waster," it was slightly miscast, and had been discarded as trash by its antique maker. These were hardly the finest products of antiquity, and under ordinary circumstances would never have been in a British Museum display cabinet. A placard explained their unusual path to prominence. It was striking to think about how much trouble had been caused by such tiny objects, and about how deceptively inconsequential they might once have seemed, lying hidden away in the museum's strong rooms in their multitudinous quantity.



A different case showed some of Townley's more distinguished gems—examples that had never gone missing. One was a fragment of what had in antiquity been a much larger cameo of a female figure in profile. The fragment was carved from onyx marked with bands that its creator had cunningly incorporated into the rendering of the subject's hair. It was beautiful and mysterious, and the fact that it had been set in gold indicated that its eighteenth-century owner had thought so, too. I remembered something Gradel had told me the last time we spoke: that among the objects he had bought, or considered buying, which he now suspected came from the Townley collection were two very fine gem fragments that, on examination, he had determined to be eighteenth-century fakes. Gradel then noted that Townley, unlike most aristocratic collectors—who craved the biggest and best and most intact gems—had a taste for fragments. "These two fragments were clearly intended to deceive," Gradel went on. "In normal commercial terms, it didn't make sense to make them. It only makes sense if you imagine that they were made for one particular client who was known to appreciate and love fragments—namely, Charles Townley."

Gradel respected this facet of Townley's connoisseurship, he went on, because he shared it. "I actually prefer a fragment to a complete gem," he told me. "With complete pieces you are told everything, and it's too easy. Whereas if you only have a tiny fragment, it's like doing a crossword puzzle. You have to argue, to research, and to reconstruct the entire object." To have only a tiny sliver of evidence from which to figure out the whole story, Gradel concluded, was "a gorgeous intellectual challenge." ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM LAHAN

"You'll never get away with this!" Ultra Man vowed as he wriggled in his chains. "You may destroy me, but you'll never destroy what I stand for!"

Death Skull let out a hysterical cackle, which echoed piercingly from the stone walls of his lair.

"Why so combative?" he said, emerging from the shadows. "At the end of the day, we're not so different, you and I."

"What are you talking about?" Ultra Man demanded.

"We are both strangers to this world," Death Skull intoned. "Maligned, misunderstood. We make our own paths, live by our own rules, refuse to compromise for anyone. Yes, in many ways, we are the same."

Ultra Man squinted at him. "I don't know, man," he said. "That's a pretty big stretch. Like, I know we both wear capes, or whatever. But I stand for good, and you stand for evil. That's about as different as it gets."

"Hmm," Death Skull murmured. "Hmm."

"I told you it was pointless," Death Skull said to his wife, Jackie. "It's impossible to make friends after forty."

"I do it all the time," Jackie said.

"It's different for guys!" Death Skull shrieked.

"I want more specifics," Jackie pressed. "What did Ultra Man say when you asked him if he wanted to be friends with you?"

Death Skull averted his black eyes.

"Let me guess," Jackie said. "You didn't do it like we practiced."

"I'm not going to just walk up to him and say, 'Please be my friend,'" he scoffed. "I mean, what is this, *kindergarten*?"

He let out a cackle, but the echo wasn't great, because their apartment had carpeting.

"O.K., so Ultra Man isn't a good fit," Jackie said. "That doesn't mean you have to give up on friendship. Why don't you try joining a group for villains, like the Terrible Ten or the Harvard Club?"

"The dues are obscene!" Death Skull thundered. "I don't even play squash!"

"Look," Jackie said. "If you want to stop being lonely—and don't try to pretend you're not, because you already admitted it when you were drunk—then you've got to be more open-minded." She headed for the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Death Skull called after her.

"Girls' night," she said.

"Oh," Death Skull said. "Right."

He watched as she prepared a pitcher of mojitos, mashing the limes with practiced efficiency. He couldn't remember the last time he'd hosted guests of his own. His henchmen came over for dinner sometimes, but that didn't count. As much as he liked Scuzz and Rumble, they were his employees. Even if he told them that things were going to be casual, they always came dressed up, with the jumpsuits and the belts and the whole deal. And although they usually seemed to enjoy his company, he could sense something forced about their cheer. Even the most basic of puns had them rolling around on the ground in hysterics, clutching their sides and shouting, "Good one, boss!" The truth was, from the moment he'd dropped them into toxic waste and transformed them into monsters, there'd been a power imbalance. For all he knew, they didn't even *like* him; they were just pretending to, because they didn't want to get fired or choked out or dropped back into toxic waste to be transformed into even more horrifying "next level" monsters, which was something Death Skull did to them sometimes to up the ante toward the ends of battles.

Death Skull went to the den and flicked on his supercomputer. A news update was flashing on the screen. Ultra Man had not only somehow escaped from his chains; he'd already managed to get himself invited to a party. There he was, dressed as his billionaire playboy alter ego, yukking it up with Mayor Price at some charity ball.

"Computer, enhance image," Death Skull muttered.

He stared at the two men's faces, trying to determine what they were laughing about. It was probably an inside joke, he decided, like a reference to something they'd laughed about some other time. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed like that, just a normal, nonhysterical laugh. It looked so fun.

He went to the living room to see if there were any more mojitos. Jackie and her friends were watching "The Bachelor." He waited until they laughed at something, then emerged from the shadows.

"Ha ha ha, yes," he said. "Those women on the show should all be killed."

Jackie's friends fell silent, clearly taken aback by his sudden looming presence.

"It's nice to see everyone," Death Skull said. "Claire and Britt, thank you for coming to our apartment."

"This is Rhea and Kate," Jackie said. "From my book club."

"Oh," Death Skull said. He downed the half a mojito he'd managed to scrounge from the pitcher. "So, what's happening on the show this week?" he asked. "Who does the bachelor like?"

"Did you see that Ultra Man escaped?" Jackie said, with a hinting tone. "He's at that big ball at the museum. If you go now, you might be able to recapture him. You could burst through the ceiling and make a joke like 'Sorry to crash the party' or 'Sorry to drop in.' You know, some pun like that."

"I'd rather see what's going on with this bachelor!" Death Skull said, forcing a smile at the women on the couch. "What is his deal, anyway? I mean, this guy should be dropped into toxic waste and turned into a monster, right?"

He crept toward the couch and hovered near it until Jackie begrudgingly made room for him.

"This is so fun!" Death Skull said, kicking his bony feet onto the ottoman. "HA HA HA HA HA HA."

Later that night, while Jackie slept in the guest room, Death Skull paced and plotted. It was true that he had no friends, and it definitely seemed to be putting a strain on his marriage. But he was used to battling back from the brink. No one had believed that he could escape from the Asylum for the Criminally Insane, and he had done that several hundred times. He would find a friend—and not just any friend. The greatest friend of all. A friend that was cooler than Ultra Man, cooler than Mayor Price, cooler even than Rhea and Kate from Jackie's book club—a friend so cool that the world would have no choice but to admit that he, too, was cool. Yes—he could see it all now. The scheme was already forming in his mind, a plan so simple

that it made him cackle hysterically.

"Please stop cackling," Jackie texted him from the guest room. "I'm trying to sleep."

"I have a plan to make a friend," he texted back.

"We can talk about it tomorrow," she texted. "Please don't laugh like that again. Good night."

"O.K.," he texted back, followed by the skeleton-hand thumbs-up emoji he used with her sometimes. "I love you." He looked out the window and peered down at the city lights below. Tomorrow, a new dawn would rise over Empire City, and with it a new age. Yes, there was no stopping it now. Victory would soon be his.

"Is this your first time at male-friendship speed dating?"

"Yes," Death Skull said, shifting awkwardly in his folding chair.

"Same here," the man seated across from him said. "My name is Doug."

"I know what your name is," Death Skull snapped. "Your information is written on the card."

"Oh," Doug said. "Right." He was wearing an overly large blue oxford shirt that Death Skull could tell had been purchased with this event in mind. The paper tags had been removed, but a few plastic fasteners remained, protruding from various buttonholes on his sleeves and chest.

"Are you having fun?" Doug asked.

"No," Death Skull said. "This event is unbelievably pathetic. When I signed up online, I didn't realize it would be like this."

"What did you think it would be like?" Doug asked.

"I don't know," Death Skull said. "I just didn't think that it would be this sad and fucked up."

"Oh," Doug said.

Death Skull checked the egg timer. They'd been sitting across from each other for only three minutes. There were still twelve to go.

"Have you seen 'Rick and Morty'?" Doug ventured.

"No," Death Skull said.

"Never?"

"Never!" Death Skull bellowed, slamming his fist so hard against the plastic card table that it left an indentation of his knuckles.

He checked the egg timer and was shocked to discover that it still read twelve minutes. Incredibly, not even one minute had passed since he'd last checked it.

"You should really watch 'Rick and Morty,'" Doug said. "I think you'd really like it."

"How do you know?" Death Skull demanded. "You know nothing of me or my ways!"

"I just think you'd like it," Doug murmured.

Death Skull sighed. "Maybe you're right," he allowed. "A lot of guys have

said that to me today. That I would like the TV show 'Rick and Morty.'"

"It's really funny," Doug said.

"I guess I'll check it out," Death Skull said.

Doug smiled. "Awesome."

Death Skull skimmed the informational card in front of him. "So," he said indifferently. "It says here you work for the phone company."

"Yeah," Doug said.

"Well, at least you have a job," Death Skull said. "The Fast Friends Web site said this event was for busy urban professionals. So far, everyone I've met has been fully unemployed."

"Oh," Doug said.

"What do you do for the phone company?"

"I'm in customer service," Doug said.

Death Skull cocked his head and smirked. "Then I guess you could say you really *answer the call!*"

He paused for laughter, but none came.

"Was that a joke?" Doug asked, with genuine confusion.

"Yes," Death Skull said.

"Oh," Doug said, chuckling politely. "Good one." The egg timer ticked between them.

"I'm excited for you to watch 'Rick and Morty,'" Doug said. "I think you'll really like it."

"You said that already," Death Skull said.

"Sorry," Doug said. "I'm a little out of it. I had to work late last night."

Death Skull leaned forward slightly in his folding chair. "How come?"

"There was this really angry customer. Just kept going off on me."

"Does that happen often?"

"Every day," Doug said. "Sometimes when I pick up the phone they're already screaming, before I even say hello."

Death Skull stared at Doug as if seeing him for the first time. "It sounds like, in some ways, you're a stranger to this world," he said. "Maligned, misunderstood."

"Yeah, kind of," Doug said. "Like, this guy last night, he kept saying he wished I would get ass cancer, just because I wouldn't refund his April bill. And I just kept saying, 'I'm sorry, sir, but I have to follow company protocol.'"

"Because you make your own path," Death Skull said. "Live by your own rules, refuse to compromise for anyone."

"Yeah," Doug said. "I mean, kind of." His stomach gurgled audibly. "Sorry," he said. "I'm pretty hungry."

"I'm hungry, too. The Web site said there would be food."

"Yeah," Doug said. "I mean, there were those chips, but they went fast."

"Tell me about it," Death Skull said. "I only got, like, three chips."

"I think I got, like, *half* a chip," Doug said.

The men shared a short, nonhysterical laugh. Death Skull eyed the egg timer. He was surprised to discover that their time was almost up, and even more surprised that he was disappointed.

"You know, Doug," he said. "We're not so different, you and I."

Doug broke into a broad grin. "Really?" he said. "That's great!" He cleared his throat. "Hey, maybe, since we're both still hungry, we could get lunch after this?"

Death Skull smiled. He was about to suggest Buffalo Wild Wings when he heard a familiar whooshing noise. He turned just in time to see Ultra Man flying toward them through an open window, his chiselled jaw clenched with determination. Everyone in the convention center stopped and stared as he landed on their table.

"Fear not, citizen!" he cried, extend-

ing a brawny hand to Doug. "I'll save you!"

Doug looked puzzled. "From what?"

"From Death Skull," Ultra Man said. "Isn't he terrorizing you?"

Doug laughed. "Oh, no!" he said. "It's nothing like that! This is a male-friendship speed-dating event. See?" He pulled a worn brochure out of his fanny pack. He had to stand to pass it up to Ultra Man, and Death Skull was startled by how short he was. Ultra Man flipped through the brochure slowly, as if savoring it. Most of his expression was obscured by his mask, but Death Skull could make out the hint of a smile on the visible portion of his face.

"Wow," Ultra Man said. "So, Death Skull, you're just, like, *here*? As a participant?"

Death Skull could feel his heart pounding in his rib cage.

"No," he heard himself say. Doug's smile faded.

"It was all part of my evil plan," Death Skull continued, doing his best to ignore Doug's wounded gaze. "I was only *pretending* to be part of this event, so I could get close enough to people to . . . you know . . . steal from them."

"So let me get this straight," Ultra Man said. "You signed up for a male-friendship speed-dating event so you could gain the trust of lonely men in order to rob them?"

"Yeah," Death Skull said. "Ha ha ha."

"Man, that's fucked up," Ultra Man said. "You normally do, like, diamond heists." He checked Doug's card. "This guy works for the phone company. How much cash could he possibly have on him?"

A flicker of hurt flashed across Doug's face.

"Don't worry," Ultra Man said, giving Doug's shoulder a patronizing squeeze. "I'll save you."

Doug's cheeks were mottled with humiliation, but he managed to contort his lips into an approximation of a smile.

"Thanks," he said.

Ultra Man roughly tossed Doug over his shoulder and flew out the window, the tails of Doug's shirt flapping kitelike in the breeze. Death Skull watched them for as long as he was able, and when they disappeared from view he felt a sinking sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced before, as it dawned on him for the first time in his life that he might be, on some level, a bad guy.

Death Skull was sitting in the den, drinking the dregs of a mojito, when he heard a light knock on the door.

"Hey," Jackie said. "Just wanted to check in. Haven't heard a cackle in a while."

"I'm fine," Death Skull said, too ashamed to meet her eyes.

"There's an event at the museum tonight," she said brightly. "They're unveiling the world's biggest diamond ring. Maybe you could crash through the ceiling and say, 'Ring, ring, it's me.' You know, like a pun on the word 'ring.'"

Death Skull sighed. It was a great pitch and, delivery-wise, completely in his wheelhouse. But he just couldn't find the motivation.

"Be honest," he said. "Do you think I'm a bad guy?"

Jackie hesitated. "I mean, sort of," she admitted. "You're a psychopathic ghoul who will stop at nothing to serve your megalomaniacal greed."

"I guess that's why I have no friends," he said. "Because I'm a monster."

Jackie sat down beside him on the couch. "Or maybe it's the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

She took his bony hand in hers. "You know, we've been together twenty years and we've never once talked about your origin story."

"It's not that complicated," Death Skull said. "I fell into a vat of toxic waste, and it transformed me into an anthropomorphic skeleton."

"No, your real origin story," she said. "Middle school."

Death Skull grew even paler than usual as he recalled his years of being bullied. The names, the jokes, the pranks. In ninth grade it got to the point where he was, like, Maybe I *am* gay—that was how much they'd got in his head. By the time he reached adulthood, he'd given up on trying to befriend people. It was safer to try to impress them or, if that failed, to knock them out with brightly colored gas. Being a monster hadn't made him lonely. Being lonely had made him a monster.

A peal of laughter pulled him from his reverie. "It sounds like 'The Bachelor' is starting," he observed.

Jackie squeezed his knobby fingers. "Do you want to watch with us?"

The offer was tempting, but Death Skull managed to resist.

"Thank you," he said, rising to his feet. "But I've got work to do."

Death Skull sat at his supercomputer, plotting his next move. Fast Friends had refused to provide him with Doug's contact information on the ground that the two of them had not technically matched. If he wanted to find Doug, he would have to resort to more nefarious means. He pulled up the Web site for the phone company and dialled the help line.

"This is Doug from Empire Mobile. Thank you for calling customer service. Your call may be recorded for quality assurance."

"Recorded?" Death Skull raised a craggy eyebrow, which was not visible to Doug. "Maybe we should tell them to mind their *phone* business!"

He laughed hysterically.

"Are you still there?" he asked after some time had passed.

"Yeah," Doug said.

"Listen, I'm sorry about before," Death Skull said.

"I'm not supposed to take personal calls," Doug said.

"What about making your own path? Living by your own rules?"

"I've got to go."

"I just wanted to say that I've thought it over, and I do want to hang out sometime."

"Well, I don't!" Doug said with a self-possession that caught Death Skull off guard. "I don't want to hang out with someone who's embarrassed to be seen with me."

"It's not like that," Death Skull said.

"I don't believe you," Doug said. "Thank you for calling Empire Mobile."

"Doug!"

Death Skull grimaced as the phone went dead in his hands. But his disappointment gave way to resolve. He'd blown it with Doug—that much was certain—but that didn't mean he couldn't make things right. Yes, he could

see it all now—a way to win back Doug's trust. The ruse was so elegant, it made him cackle hysterically.

"I think I figured out how to work things out with Doug," he texted Jackie. "But you don't need to text back. I know you're watching 'The Bachelor.' Enjoy the rest of the episode. We'll talk later. I love you."

Death Skull sat in a towering armchair, his black eyes reflecting the embers in his fireplace. Scuzz and Rumble stood on either side of him, their bulging arms folded in a show of menace.

"Ready, boss?" Scuzz asked.

"Ready," Death Skull said.

He grinned as the camera flicked on, beaming his ghastly face onto every TV screen in Empire City.

"This is Death Skull," he announced. "And I've commandeered the airwaves. Don't try to change the channel. I'm the *bonely* show in town!"

Scuzz and Rumble fell to the ground, clutching their sides.

"Good one, boss!" Scuzz said.

"Yeah!" Rumble said. "Wowie-zowie, wow!"

Death Skull sighed. "Guys, come on," he said. "It wasn't that good."

"We thought it was!" Scuzz said, a panicked expression in his eyes.

"Yeah!" Rumble said.

"O.K.," Death Skull said, letting the matter drop. He stared at the camera's blinking red light. There were millions of people watching him right now—Ultra Man, Mayor Price, probably some people that he went to high school with. But that was the whole point. He took a deep breath and kept going.

"I want to send a message to the people of Empire City," he said. "Normally, when I do this, it's to announce a crime that I'm planning to commit, which I realize, as I'm saying it out loud, is a shortsighted thing for me to do. In any case, I recently signed up for a male-friendship speed-dating event, because I've been having trouble making friends."

Scuzz and Rumble exchanged a look, which Death Skull clocked but ignored.

"While I was there," Death Skull said, "I met someone I thought was cool. His name is Doug, and he works for the phone company. And I know he's watching, because we're three minutes into the new episode of 'Rick and Morty.' Doug, I want you to know that I've finally watched some episodes, and you were right. I love the show. It's so good. And this episode I've interrupted is going to be on *again* tomorrow night, and I've decided to host a watch party at my apartment. So, no pressure whatsoever, but, if you're not still mad at me, I'd love it if you could be there. I know I didn't make the greatest first impression. I've got a lot of work to do on myself. But I'm not a bad guy, or at least I don't want to be a bad guy anymore. And I know that normally I end these messages by doing that crazy laughing thing, where the camera pushes in on my face while I absolutely lose it, but this time I'm just going to put up my cell number, and, Doug, you can text if you want, but, again, no pressure. That's it. That's everything. Good night."

He turned to his henchmen as the camera flickered off.

"You guys are invited, too," he said. "But it's seriously optional. If you're busy, I won't be offended or choke you out or anything like that. That's not who I am anymore."

Scuzz and Rumble exchanged a hopeful look.

"Does that mean you'll transform us back into humans?" Scuzz asked.

"Well, no, I can't do that," Death Skull said. "That's not how toxic waste works."

"So these changes to our bodies are permanent."

"Yeah."

"So I'm always going to be, like, this rhinoceros."

"Yeah."

"Man," Scuzz said. "Fuck."

Death Skull flashed him a playful smirk. "At least you can say you're really a *made man!*"

He paused for laughter, but Scuzz just stared in silence at his hooves.

"I can't believe I'm going to die like this," he said.

"I'm really sorry," Death Skull said. "How about I pay for plastic surgery? There's got to be a way to at least shave down your hooves into the shape of feet. That's something, right?"

"It's better than nothing," Scuzz acknowledged.

Death Skull's phone buzzed, and he frantically pulled it from his robe. He'd told himself that it didn't matter whether Doug responded, that he'd already done something valuable simply by reaching out. But when the text came in it felt like a diamond in his hand.

"Do I put the limes in whole?" Death Skull asked.

"No," Jackie said. "You just want the juice."

"Oh," Death Skull said.

"Don't worry," Jackie said. "You're going to do great." She eyed her phone. "I'd better get going. Marlyse made a reservation."

Death Skull watched as she checked her lipstick in the mirror. "Look at us," he said. "You're seeing friends, and I'm seeing friends." He hesitated. "We're not so different, you and I."

She pulled him in for a kiss. There was a knock on the door, and Jackie began to offer reassurance, but Death Skull was already bounding down the hallway with excitement. He took three deep breaths to steady himself and swung the door open. Doug was wearing the same shirt as last time, but at some point he'd managed to remove the fasteners.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Death Skull said.

He wasn't sure whether to shake Doug's hand or hug him, so he split the difference, pumping Doug's fist with one hand while sort of rubbing his shoulder with the other.

"This is Scuzz and Rumble," he said, leading Doug into the living room. "They haven't seen 'Rick and Morty' yet."

"You're gonna love it," Doug told them. "Oh, I brought Fritos, by the way."

"Thanks," Death Skull said, taking the bag. "Hopefully you'll get more than half a chip this time!"

Doug and Death Skull shared a gentle chuckle.

"I don't get it," Scuzz admitted.

"It's an inside joke we have," Death Skull said proudly. "But don't worry. I'll tell you all about it." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Simon Rich on friendship and supervillains.

THE ART WORLD

DEATH IN VENICE

At the Biennale, the past dignifies the weird, desperate present.

BY JACKSON ARN

Physical fatigue is always a factor in criticism, but at the Venice Biennale, the world's most prestigious recurring art exhibition, it picks up a few seats on the private jury of taste. The event, showcasing hundreds of artists and patronized by hundreds of thousands of people, spans two main locations: the lush parkland of the Giardini, created by Napoleon, and the cluster of retired shipyards and armories known as the Arsenale. Each day of press previews, my black sneakers gained a layer of whitish dust, as though mummified by travel, and my eyes burned with a thousand sightings of the same pink tote bag on everybody's arm. (By the time I left, it seemed as Venetian as a Bellini.) Gravity tugs harder than usual here. No dosage of caffeine is enough. Successful art works sense their audience's aches and respond with exquisite tact.

The limitations of the human body may well be the Biennale's true subject, but at this installment, the sixtieth since 1895, the explicit theme is otherness. The show's title is "Foreigners Everywhere,"

Several works in "Compose," Yuko Mohri's installation for the Japanese pavilion, evoke the leaks in Tokyo's metro system.

which at its least trivial signals an emphasis on the creations of the marginalized. In the eighty-seven national pavilions that make up half of the event, many of the featured artists are Indigenous; at the Central Exhibition, which constitutes the other half, a good chunk hail from the Global South and a majority are deceased, the past being the biggest foreign country of all. You might want to complain about the preponderance of death in a show that is implicitly about the health of contemporary art. But any curatorial choice that gives us fewer immersive rooms and preening enfants terribles doesn't seem so bad to me.

How could it, when there are still artists like Affandi to discover? A movie-theatre clerk who taught himself how to paint in the nineteen-thirties, already renowned in his native Indonesia, he is represented in the Central Exhibition by a glorious shriek of a self-portrait, in wormy streaks of yellow and green. Adriano Pedrosa, the Biennale's curator and the artistic director of the São Paulo Museum of Art, excels at connecting artists separated by vast chasms of time and geography—walking around, I sensed that if Affandi, who died in 1990, had taught himself to weave, he might have made art like Shalom Kufakwatenzi, a young Zimbabwean with two textile works in the show. (At times, Affandi very nearly *did* weave with paint, squeezing thick lines of pigment straight onto the canvas and arranging them with his hands.) There's the same bright, unapologetic raggedness, the stuff of life frozen in mid-wriggle.

Many other fine pieces in the Central Exhibition are textile-based: a dense, earthy slab of threads by the Colombian Olga de Amaral, who turns ninety-two this year; a selection of embroidered burlap pieces by the anonymous Chileans known as Arpilleristas; large, cool compositions by Susanne Wenger, who spent most of her long life in Nigeria, practicing the Yoruba religion and mastering batik, the art of wax-resist dyeing. Her pieces, which show mortals and deities floating side by side, stick to the same spiky patterns and subdued hues but never retrace their steps; you could imagine them continuing forever, and might well want them to. If not, walk a few feet to the exhibition's other main batik specialist, Ṣàngódáre Gbádégẹ̀sin Àjàlá, who passed away in 2021. His creations are as religiously inclined as Wenger's—he was her adopted son—but with a livelier clamor of bodies pressed together. There's almost too much to savor; the intricate coloring, combined with pale spiderweb shading, gives the figures a pimpled texture I can't remember seeing in art before and now can't stop noticing everywhere. Àjàlá, Wenger, and the rest of the fibre brigade may be the snappiest retort to the gripe that there are too many dead artists this year: when we're dealing with textiles, one of the oldest visual art forms and still backlogged with brilliance, the distinction between new and old stops mattering so much. Good is good, even if it takes decades for anyone to notice.

Is the sixtieth Venice Biennale a good exhibition, then? There's superb stuff to be sniffed out, although with hundreds of artists from around the world there had really better be. The Giardini and the Arsenale contain more work than several respectable museums put together—and that's not even counting various collateral exhibitions, plus the handful of national pavilions scattered across the rest of the city. Lines can be nasty and outbursts nastier still. On the first day of previews, a guard sent me to a ticketing booth to haggle with an attendant. She asked me who I was writing for; the words had barely left my mouth before the man behind me started cursing me, this magazine, America, and Joe Biden.

Granted, there are things worth getting upset about here, with good and bad art works talking over each other for entire rooms at a time. Peak braying is reached in a single tall gallery that Pedrosa has stuffed like a storage unit with abstract paintings by thirty-seven artists, most of them making their Biennale début. You can always try to make up for neglect by rushing lots of strong material through at once, but this doesn't necessarily do the material any favors: plenty of abstraction needs time and space to bloom in the beholder's eye, and none of the paintings in this room are permitted much of either, with the result being that nothing much blooms at all. Blame the curation, blame the inherent dilemma of the logjam—either way, it's the one portion of the Central Exhibition which strikes me as an outright failure. A Rothko couldn't thrive in a place like this.

The most obvious way to stand out in a big, loud multitude is to be louder, and loudness, with a side helping of eeriness, was more or less the métier of the mid-century Italian artist Domenico Gnoli. His sprawling painting of a woman's shoe looks as rough as sandpaper, with two vampire fangs of red fabric poking down from its top edge—it has to be one of the most calmly odd things in the Central Exhibition this year, and also one of the most purely pleasurable, pulling you in with the friendly yank of a pop song. Gnoli's approach isn't so far from that of the Mexican Ana Segovia, whose "Pos' se acabó este cantar" is one of this Biennale's more memorable film pieces. Panting with hot color and haywire machismo, it features two Mexican cowboys, or *charros*, standing millimetres apart, their every move swollen to monumentality by the camera's closeness. Flirtation is hard to distinguish from violence, sexy thrashing being rather similar to the angry kind. You may long for answers, or learn to enjoy the twinges of comedy and menace.

With fewer than half of the Central Exhibition artists presently breathing, the national pavilions have double the usual pressure to sum up the state of contemporary art. Some countries always participate, though others, like Ethiopia and Tanzania, are here for the first time, and another, Russia, declined to take part and lent its empty pavilion to Bolivia. On my second day of pavilion-going, a P.R. person told me that the decision was only a tiny sub-scheme in Russia's ongoing bid for Bolivia's mining reserves. Oscar Wilde thought that all art was quite useless; whether it can win Vladimir Putin a bottomless supply of lithium remains to be seen.

If this Biennale can be trusted, though, the state of contemporary art is rumbly. At first, I thought the noises were coming from thunderclouds, or

YUKO MOHRI / COURTESY THE ARTIST / PROJECT FULFILL ART SPACE / MOTHER'S TANKSTATION / YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY / TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY; PHOTOGRAPH BY KUGEYASUHIDE

my own gut, but no—ambient echoes score a significant number of the national pavilions this year, enough to give the entire show a low, uniform, *very important* murmur, italics for the ears. It's the right soundtrack for pavilions that seem locked in a deadly serious arms race of whimsy. Visit a few and fun quickly hardens into formula. You wait in line, drone-serenaded. You go in and immediately some whatsit mugs you: a gaggle of masked figures rolling around in muck, a rain forest of rainbow tendrils, an arrangement of rainbow beads, a wrecked boat, a dead giraffe.

The giraffe—actually a spotted hut-like structure, modelled on the carcass of a giraffe that died in the Prague Zoo in the nineteen-fifties—can be found in the Czech pavilion, courtesy of Eva Kot'átková. Some informal polling suggests that it's one of the more popular pavilions this year, which I suspect has a lot to do with how nice it feels to squat inside the giraffe hut and rest for a minute. When you stand up and return to the rumbling outside, the visceral weirdness fades fast—just another interchangeable phrase in the big Biennale Mad Lib. A welcome exception is Yuko Mohri's installation in the Japanese pavilion. Several of her pieces transform the space into a cavern of dripping water, a nod to the leaks, worsened by a series of earthquakes, that have dogged Tokyo's metro system for years. The most striking works star rotting fruit, which has been poked with electrodes that translate moisture into—you guessed it—drone noises. It's no less weird than a dead giraffe, of course, but for once the weirdness doesn't feel like a weapon aimed at the viewer. The tone is calmer, serene in its indifference; nature and technology are locked in a Platonic dialogue that we mortals can only eavesdrop on. Mohri doesn't demand your shock, and so earns your interest.

Good? Bad? When you're deep in the trance state brought on by pavilion-hopping, it's probably more honest to think in terms of what works and what doesn't. Two days after our first meeting, the man who yelled at me walked right by without showing any sign of recognition—too preoccupied with the forty-sixth President, I suppose, or possibly with the timeless mysteries of art. Maybe he'd just come from the German pavilion, the apotheosis of post-good art at this year's Biennale. It contains multiple offerings, including a video by Yael Bartana that crosscuts between woodland witchcraft and a spaceship, and an unclassifiable piece by Ersan Mondtag that can be read as a wretched, furious monument to the artist's grandfather, who died of asbestos poisoning. Alone, each piece might not have fared so well—Bartana's might have been too woozy-cheesy, Mondtag's too self-definingly sombre. Yet they somehow unlock each other. Wandering through Mondtag's re-creation of his grandfather's world, complete with performers and mounds of dust, I caught a glimpse of C.G.I. outer space, and the obscenity of this old family tragedy jabbed at me like it was mine.

The real standouts here are the understated pieces. The jurors seem to have felt so, anyway, when they awarded the Golden Lion to Archie Moore, a First Nations Australian artist who covered the walls of his national pavilion with a seemingly infinite family tree, scratched in chalk like a school project. Some of the entries are blurred, and most are too dense or high to make out in the dim light. In the center of the room sits a stack of redacted documents concerning dead First Nations Australians, separated from its surroundings by a ring of water—an island in an island. Like Mohri, Moore seems to be holding something back, and, in a Biennale full of hard sells, that works. But even soft-sell art can seem overdone. A few days before Moore's victory, a sign outside the Israeli national pavilion announced that it wouldn't open until a ceasefire and a hostage agreement were reached. In all probability, Israel's will be the only national pavilion that anyone is still talking about in two years. By then, though, the Biennale will be back, and Venice will fill with new rumbling, the lingua franca of the contemporary art world: part purr, part groan, part long, uncertain *hmmm*. ♦

"I love finding new places to sit in silence and scroll on our phones together."

ORIGIN STORY

What do we hope to learn from our prehistory?

BY MAYA JASANOFF

Speculations about the deep past tend to invite fantasies about the future.

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELE CASTELLANO

In the summer of 1856, laborers at a limestone quarry near Düsseldorf were clearing mud and chert out of a cave when they turned up a fossilized skull. It was long and elliptical, with wide sinuses and a heavy ridge over the eye sockets. The workers thought it belonged to some kind of bear, but a local schoolteacher who inspected it had a different hunch. He thought that it was a previously undiscovered kind of human being. The British geologist William King, setting the skull alongside those of chimpanzees and Andaman Islanders, agreed; he declared that it belonged to an entirely new species, which he named *Homo neanderthalensis*, for the Neander Valley, where it was found.

What we know today as Neanderthals might have been called Engisians or Gibraltarians, if remains of the same species that were dug up earlier in Engis, a municipality in Belgium, and on the Iberian Peninsula had been accurately identified. In the event, English descriptions of the Neanderthal remains appeared at the same time as Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" (1859), and excited scientists who were mulling over the book's theory of natural selection. Thomas Henry Huxley, an enthusiastic Darwinian, viewed the fossils as proof that "we must extend by long epochs the most liberal estimate that has yet been made of the antiquity of Man." That extended era soon got a name: "prehistory," describing the period before humans recorded their existence in writing.

Since the Neanderthal discovery, the start date for human prehistory has been pushed farther and farther back. The bones of Java Man, found in the eighteen-nineties, and of Peking Man, found in the nineteen-twenties, suggested that humans emerged out of Asia between seven hundred thousand and 1.5 million years ago. Twentieth-century excavations of the genus *Australopithecus* in South Africa, Tanzania, and Ethiopia—where forty per cent of an australopithecine skeleton dubbed Lucy was retrieved, in 1974—shifted hominin origins to some 3.2 million years ago and informed the "out of Africa" theory that remains widespread today.

Each of these discoveries helped answer a historical question—How did humans become human?—while deepening a metaphysical one: What makes humans human? King felt certain that the Neanderthal brain was "incapable of moral and theistic conceptions" of the sort that distinguished humans from other animals. Huxley, for his part, happily accepted that "Man is, in substance and structure, one with the brutes," although only humans had "the marvellous endowment of intelligible and rational speech." Other scholars have claimed that humans alone have the power to generate non-utilitarian symbols, or that humans alone make tools not simply to accomplish immediate tasks—the way a chimpanzee uses a stick to get ants—but to make *other* tools for future use. The most popular account of human distinctiveness today comes from Yuval Noah Harari, whose "Sapiens" extrapolates the entire course of human history from the banal claim that *Homo sapiens* has a unique capacity for creativity.

Accounts of the deep human past, in short, rest on assumptions about what it means to be human in the first place, giving them normative implications for modern society. As the historian Stefanos Geroulanos writes in "The Invention of Prehistory" (Liveright), European intellectuals have, in the past two and a half centuries, turned to prehistory to explain things like the structure of families, the basis of states, the prevalence of war, and the nature of sentiment. "The story of human origins has never really been about the past," he says. "Pre-history is about the

present day. It always has been." When people wrote about distant times, what were they revealing about their own?

In the beginning, Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed, humans had nothing but "two legs to run with" and "two arms to defend themselves with"; they had no language but "the simple cry of nature" and no passions beyond food, sex, and sleep. He imagined the "state of nature" as a simple, peaceful, egalitarian counterpoint to the shackles and constraints of so-called civilization. Rousseau was hardly the first European thinker to draw the contrast—Thomas Hobbes, of course, had devoted a few sentences to what he supposed was the "nasty, brutish, and short" version of life in the "state of nature"—but for Rousseau it wasn't a brief aside. He thought hard about what life might have been like in the deep past, and in doing so, Geroulanos writes, made it "possible to think of prehistoric humans" as modernity's ancestors, and to evaluate the present in prehistory's mirror.

European intellectuals in Rousseau's wake searched for evidence of how things had really been. Languages offered one clue. In Kolkata, in the seventeen-eighties, William Jones, a British philologist and an East India Company judge, noticed that Sanskrit shared with Greek and Latin such strong affinities that the languages must have "sprung from some common source." An "Indo-European" family of languages was promptly diagrammed in the form of a genealogical tree, branching through time and space from East to West.

Jones's insight had particular influence on nineteenth-century German scholars, some of whom proposed that the original Indo-Europeans—also called Aryans—had come from Asia and overrun northern Europe, where they sired the Germanic tribes who went on to bring down the Roman Empire. And just as Aryans were the parents of ancient Germans, the Germans were the parents of modern Europe—a link cemented in the German word for Indo-European, *Indogermanisch*. The invaders were imagined as muscular, spirited forces reinvigorating stagnant, corrupted realms. Nazi race theorists took these ideas one step further by fixing the Indo-European homeland in northern Germany proper, propelling fantasies of a fresh wave of Aryan conquest.

While Continental nationalists emphasized their superior prehistoric roots, scholars in the expanding British and American empires bolstered a "civilizing mission" by identifying prehistoric practices in contemporary non-European societies. "The European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris many a trait for reconstructing the picture of his own primitive ancestors," Edward Burnett Tylor, a founder of cultural anthropology, wrote. He focussed on a long-standing preoccupation of ethnologists—the origins of religion—and positioned a belief in supernatural entities at the primitive end of an axis whose other pole was modern science. Lewis Henry Morgan, a sometime lawyer in upstate New York, compared kinship structures across a hundred and thirty cultures (many of them Native North American) to elaborate a theory of social evolution that started with the "savage" communal family, proceeded to "barbarian" clans, and eventuated in a "civilized" order led by male property owners.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Western intellectuals regularly portrayed the human past in groupings of three stages. Savage, barbarian, civilized. Animism, religion, science. Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age. Where the thinkers differed was on whether or how these triune stages represented "progress." On one side were Hobbes's heirs, who vigorously championed civilization over savagery—that is, if civilization meant accumulating private wealth, using industrial technology, and fighting fewer wars. On the other side were Rousseau's, who saw in prehistory—and its putative living representatives among non-Western societies—forms of egalitarianism and harmony that modernity had destroyed. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for instance, read Morgan closely and concluded that a primitive communism had been wrecked by the emergence of marriage and monogamy. Either way, Geroulanos points out, real-life "primitive" peoples on the receiving end of the civilizing mission (people like the Andamanese, to whom King compared the Neanderthal) were frequently described as "disappearing"—natural casualties of human evolution, rather than targets of conquest and extermination.

The catastrophic carnage of the Great War prompted a murkier speculation: What if something "savage" resided within us? The German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel had speculated that while in utero human embryos pass through every stage of evolutionary history, developing first what look like gill slits and tails, which disappear in time. Though debunked, the theory had wide influence, notably on Sigmund Freud, who suggested that everyone carries a primal inheritance in the form of the Oedipus complex, which haunts the unconscious with guilt and repression. Freud's student Carl Jung delivered an antisemitic, fascist-friendly version of a primal psyche in the notion of a "collective unconscious," stamped by prehistoric archetypes. Prehistoric instinct continues to be a popular explanation for behavior that seems somehow "inhuman." The neuroscientist Paul MacLean suggested in the nineteen-fifties that the human brain contained a "reptilian" core, governed by instinct—a notion alive and well in some descriptions of Donald Trump.

Today, genetics provides the most influential account of the prehistoric past and its effects on modern humans. Though Geroulanos has little to say about it, the ability to extract and sequence ancient DNA from remains of long-dead humans has transformed our picture of human origins and population movements alike. In place of a single migration of *Homo sapiens* from Africa some fifty thousand years ago, for instance, there is evidence of multiple passages of hominins between Europe and Africa dating from around four hundred thousand years ago to upward of 1.8 million years ago. Ancient-DNA research has helped resolve the question of where the Indo-Europeans originated, pointing toward a location south of the Caucasus, with dispersals from there into India and the Eurasian steppe, and from the steppe into northern Europe. The research has even identified a kind of

hominin, the Denisovan, for which there are scant fossil remains.

Few populations have undergone as extensive a makeover as Neanderthals, whose shifting image over the past hundred and fifty years, Geroulanos shows, indexes Western attitudes about race, primitivism, and savagery. As nineteenth-century scientific racism gathered momentum, Haeckel proposed naming Neanderthals *Homo stupidus*, and the initial depictions rendered them as hunched, half-naked cavemen. In the early nineteen-hundreds, a time of startling European colonial violence in Africa, a French illustration of a Neanderthal portrayed him as a club-toting gorilla. This inspired a snarling bust made for the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, which was the model, in turn, for a bestial portrait of "Neanderthal Man" in H. G. Wells's blockbuster "The Outline of History" (1920). A diorama installed in Chicago's Field Museum in 1929, at the height of the American enthusiasm for eugenics, portrayed the Neanderthal as a neckless, bone-sucking oaf. Later, the anthropologist Carleton Coon depicted a clean-shaven Neanderthal wearing a jacket and tie, perhaps to suggest that interbreeding had given rise to present-day racial difference.

Owing to the sequencing of the Neanderthal genome, in 2010, scientists now believe that almost everybody living today carries some Neanderthal DNA—typically around two per cent of the genome in people of Asian, European, and Indigenous American and Pacific origin—and future research may well further blur the species line between Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*. You can "Meet Your Ancestors" at the Smithsonian Institution's Hall of Human Origins, in a display of more than seventy replica fossil skulls, and see the only Neanderthal skeleton in the United States. It was excavated at the Shanidar Cave, in Iraqi Kurdistan, where archeologists found evidence that Neanderthal elders were cared for by community members and buried with intent. The artist John Gurche's bust of "Nandy," reconstructing one of the males found in the cave, has his hair scooped into a fashionable man bun and a weathered face filled with poignant expression. These are Neanderthals for the age of 23andMe, which, in 2020, expanded its "Neanderthal Ancestry Report" to show whether your own Neanderthal genes incline you to have "difficulty discarding possessions you may never use," or to feel "irritable or angry when hungry (hangry)." Now that we know they're part of us, we've decided that Neanderthals may not be so savage after all.

There's a fair amount of repetition in "The Invention of Prehistory," in large measure because the currents coursing through modern Western accounts of our deep past have remained so similar since the eighteenth century. (Another book might usefully put these in conversation with concepts of prehistory favored in cultures that don't have linear concepts of time.) Although we have far more evidence today about the lives, the deaths, and the legacies of prehistoric humans than Rousseau and his peers had, social scientists continue to tread well-worn tracks about the relative merits of prehistoric societies (e.g., David Graeber and David Wengrow, "The Dawn of Everything") or their Hobbesian horrors (e.g., Steven Pinker, "The Better Angels of Our Nature"). Pop culture does its part, too, conjuring a deep past abuzz with presentist significance, in movies like "Ice Age" (2002), which spawned a multibillion-dollar franchise on a friendly message of interspecies solidarity, or "The Croods: A New Age" (2020), which transposes current political polarization onto rustic cavemen encountering a snotty liberal élite, in anatomically modern human form.

It's a truism that all chronicles of history bear the marks of their own times, and there's no reason to expect those of prehistory to be an exception. What seems distinctive, however, is the frequency with which speculations about the deep past invite fantasies about a more or less distant future: the Flintstones begat the Jetsons. In "The Descent of Man," Darwin voiced hope that, as more "small tribes are united into larger communities," mankind will "extend his social instincts and sympathies . . . to the men of all nations and races"—a wish echoed by generations of liberal internationalists. Socialists have found it helpful to invoke "primitive communism" as a basis for future redistribution, and feminists to cite prehistoric matriarchy and goddess cults when pressing for a post-patriarchal society. Bill Gates and the Silicon Valley fraternity are fans of Harari's sequel to "Sapiens," "Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow," which portrays an algorithm-governed future overseen by a handful of godlike humans.

Such stories about human origins are appealing because they explain the societies we have or justify the ones we want. Yet considerations of human history across the very *longue durée* have also prompted dismal projections, and these exert a magnetic attraction of their own. In the Second World War, technology, long held up by archeologists as the yardstick of human progress, became indelibly linked with mass destruction. As Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in the shadow of war, an aircraft pilot spraying poison "might be called superhuman in comparison to the troglodyte," but our capacity for destruction made it quite possible that the "human species will tear itself to pieces" or "take all the earth's fauna and flora down with it." Nowadays, one apocalypse looms in the irreversible human damage to the climate and to biodiversity which prompts scholars to consider the "Anthropocene" a new planetary epoch. Another triune progression haunts our nuclear-armed era: the First World War, the Second World War, the Third World War. However much we've learned about the origins of humanity, it has become dangerously easy to bring about its end. ♦

Dept. of Delicacy

From the BBC.

For more than a year, the Charity Commission has been investigating potential conflicts of interest between the charity and the Ingram-Moores' businesses after concerns mounted about potential mismanagement and misconduct.

Replying to a BBC email about this matter, Hannah Ingram-Moore said via email: "You are awful. It's a total lie."

Six minutes later she added: "Apologies. That reply was for a scammer who has been creating havoc."

PARADISE LOST

The search for a home that never was in Claire Messud's new novel.

BY JENNIFER WILSON

Messud's novels frequently feature characters with complex lineages.

ILLUSTRATION BY JUAN BERNABEU

What becomes of an attaché when the country he is attached to vanishes? In "This Strange Eventful History," by Claire Messud, a thirty-four-year-old French naval officer in Salonica (present-day Thessaloniki) learns that Nazi troops have breached the gates of Paris. Every matter is suddenly a pressing one, even his attendance at a cocktail reception at the Romanian consul's home that evening. Should he go? If so, who, exactly, would he be representing? "We haven't ceased to exist. We haven't ceased to be French," he tells himself, trying to make it true. The naval attaché, Gaston Cassar, had been sent to Salonica the year before, in 1939, to spy on Mussolini's men in the Aegean Sea. But now, with the theatre of war shifted, he finds himself marooned in a "remote and irrelevant backwater."

Feeling "rudderless," Gaston lies on his bed, a crucifix hovering on the wall above him. Looking down at his own naked, forsaken body, he sees a man "far from combat, womanish, a eunuch cowering at the sidelines of the war," his penis "dangling uselessly." He has two options to revive his manhood: he can bravely heed the call of Charles de Gaulle, who, by radio, urges all French soldiers who "want to remain free" to make their way to London to join the Resistance, or he can take a post in Beirut that would safely reunite him with his wife, Lucienne. The latter, however, would mean serving the Vichy regime. Love of country thus becomes a question of love *or* country. Gaston answers his siren's call, reasoning that he and Lucienne are "two halves from Plato's Symposium, who had found each other and their life's purpose." Theirs is a love so fervent that it triumphs over nationalism, a different mythos of the unified whole.

The Cassars will need such a love. Their country will disappear yet again, seemingly in the blink of an eye—as it always feels to people who have not been watching closely. Gaston, Lucienne, and their two small children are *pieds noirs*, people of European descent born in French colonial Algeria. In 1962, Algeria won its independence from France. Afterward, eight hundred thousand *pieds noirs*—nearly all those still remaining (many had begun to flee as the fighting intensified in the years prior)—left the country for France alongside tens of thousands of Harkis, Muslim Algerians who had fought for the French colonial government. Once in the metropole, the *pieds noirs* were regarded as alien interlopers from the fringes, dirtied by the dirty work of empire. And so, even though Gaston goes straight to his wife, the novel is an odyssey tale. Without a country, the Cassar children traverse the globe, from Paris to Sydney, Havana to Toulon, seeking all-consuming love affairs, desperate to belong to someone, if not to some place. They want to claim and be claimed, with little concern for whose home they might be wrecking.

Messud, the daughter of a *pied noir* father and a Canadian mother, was born in the U.S., raised in Sydney and Toronto, and educated at Yale and Cambridge. (She now works at Harvard University, where she teaches creative writing alongside her husband, the *New Yorker* staff writer James Wood.) Her novels frequently feature characters who are adrift and unmoored, with complex lineages that scan as vaguely foreign wherever they are. We watch others try to discipline those unruly identities, awkwardly forcing their historical baggage into cramped boxes. In "This Strange Eventful History," Messud lets the messiness of reality overflow the neatness of fiction, as if in defiance of this tendency. The novel brims with details,

many likely gleaned from a fifteen-hundred-page family history, titled "Everything That We Believed In," that her paternal grandfather left behind. Messud has used that document to craft something more interesting than a historical novel: a novel *about* history and the stories we tell ourselves about the role we play in it.

This is not the first time Messud has drawn fiction from family lore. Her sophomore novel, "The Last Life" (1999), a noirish investigation of the *pied noir* mentality, is built, like "This Strange Eventful History," around three generations of a family, the LaBasses, who fled Algeria on the precipice of independence. They resettle in the South of France, where the grandfather overcompensates for his outsider status by bemoaning how the country has become "overrun with immigrants." He sympathizes with the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen, who vigorously opposed Algerian independence: "To the last, he fought for our country, he believed in our people, he understood what it was, what it meant." The politics of the patriarch's children and grandchildren may veer from his by successive degrees, but the passage of time introduces new and more insoluble dilemmas. How do we atone for the crimes of our forebears, for blood shed before we drew breath? That question was made into doctrine by another North African, St. Augustine of Hippo, whom the family in "The Last Life" consider one of their own. For the LaBasses, colonialism is best conceived of through the Augustinian tenet of original sin, a formulation that allows them to admit fault but ultimately claim blamelessness.

It is Augustine, not the more obvious parallel Albert Camus (like Gaston, a *pied noir* "native son" of French Algeria), who proves key to Messud's diagnosis of the settlers' condition across her novels. The place the LaBasses and the Cassars long for, one that exists only in their imaginations, is of a piece with Augustine's City of God—"that gilded metropolis which shimmers forever in an impossible tense"—which the narrator of "The Last Life" compares to "an Algeria forever French." Gaston and Lucienne's children imagine the country as a Garden of Eden from which their family was banished. Unable to rewrite history, they re-create myth, chasing the perfect love of their parents in a fruitless search for a time before the Fall, when all they could see was paradise to others' hell on earth.

In 1953, Gaston's firstborn, François, arrives in Massachusetts on a Fulbright fellowship. His fraternity brothers at Amherst College acknowledge his whiteness, but regard it as impure, murky. To French exchange students, "he was foreign, he knew, a (mostly) white colonial African from that mysterious terrain across the Mediterranean." To the Americans, "he was completely indecipherable." When he returns, tanned, from a trip to Florida, they joke, "Hey, rug merchant! Showing your true Ay-rab colors at last?" François immediately starts looking for a way out of his quandary, or, rather, a way into an uncomplicated identity. Naïvely, he chooses "husband." He marries the Toronto-born Barbara, who sees in his exotic background a way into complication. Her parents, though, ask, in a panic, "Was he even fully white?" The attraction between the star-crossed, cross-cultural couple is electric and propulsive, lasting for years with unmitigated intensity. Barbara senses it as "a powerful longing that sometimes she felt even when he lay next to her in bed, the way sometimes she wanted a cigarette when she was already smoking a cigarette."

Though François's mysterious homelessness once thrilled Barbara, in time it comes to disturb the pair's domestic idyll. While the couple are living in Switzerland (where François is studying business), Barbara returns alone to Canada to care for her ailing father. François feels that a covenant has been broken, as if Barbara's citizenship in their marriage is at risk because of too much time spent abroad. In a moment of frustration, she rebukes him, telling François that he cannot understand her love for home because he has no home. She regrets the words as soon as they leave her mouth. She is, above all, "sad for him, in his loneliness without her, and sad for him that this strange background of his, this weird, provisional home to which he now alluded but which felt to her as chimerical as a mirage in the Sahara, had evaporated and left him rootless."

François's younger sister, Denise, is likewise looking for a love that will call her its own when no country will. She treats romantic rejection as a world-historic humiliation, because for her it is. When her married Parisian boss leads her on before refusing her, she feels abandoned not just by him but by all of France. Afterward, she "walks the streets of Paris in a gauzy cloud of disgrace, an object of derision at the office and in society on account of the mere accident of her birth."

Denise's journey to emotional fulfillment is made still more difficult by her sexuality. It's hinted that she's a closeted lesbian. Perhaps as a result, she fixates on men who are out of reach—married or far away or, ideally, both. During a stay in Buenos Aires, she becomes infatuated with a man she meets there, and concocts a fantasy relationship with him "from the slightest evidence"—the occasional letter, his "intent gaze" over a chaste lunch. Years later, Denise learns that her dream man in Argentina is an inveterate womanizer. Face to face with reality, she becomes irate: "She'd been a fool, enamored of a figment, had created the soul of a man who never existed." She is a woman who chooses to remain at the edges of reality because she knows she cannot count on it. She has seen the ground beneath her disappear once before. Why not live in the clouds?

She is far from alone. The Cassar offspring all walk around in a fictitious world, starting with the myth of their parents' marriage, a fairy-tale beginning they seek for themselves to no end. But an errant disclosure turns that, too, to rubble. Messud treats family secrets as their own genre, one that's governed by specific rules of revelation. Secrets make themselves felt over the *longue durée*—thus the novel's epic scale. Yet Messud also sifts through decades of daily life, in all its archival detail, to show what keeps people from asking too many questions in the meantime. Halfway through the novel, Gaston, speaking at his and Lucienne's anniversary party, says something unexpected. "But what did he say? What did he say?" the narrator probes. No one had been listening, too distracted were they by "the exhausted children, the tipsy husbands, the mothers discreetly rubbing their sore feet or sneaking one last gulp of rosé, or worrying they'd suddenly got their period and might stand to reveal a bloodstained skirt." In the din, the secret at the heart of Gaston and Lucienne's marriage goes nearly unheard; their love turns out to be as taboo as the *pieds noirs'* love for Algeria.

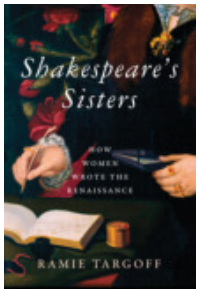
Like the Cassars, "This Strange Event-

ful History" deals with conflict largely by pretending it's not there. Though the novel makes reference to most major events of the twentieth century, from the Cuban missile crisis to the fall of the Berlin Wall, it skips the Algerian War, jumping from 1953 to 1962, marking the fighting with no more than the blank page that separates chapters. The Arab and Berber experiences of French colonial rule are likewise paid scant attention. As Lucienne tries to find lodging in L'Arba during the Second World War, she notices its inhabitants only to observe that "even the sections of the town traditionally inhabited only by Muslim families were sprinkled now with white faces."

In an essay on Albert Camus, the scholar Edward Said accused him of a similar elision, writing, "The Arabs of 'The Stranger' are nameless beings, used as background for the portentous metaphysics explored by Camus." Messud makes that very myopia her subject, intentionally obscuring the reality of Algerian life in order to take us straight to the fantasy world the Cassars have built in its ruins. The scars left by war and displacement are revealed only in states of undress, as they seek out loves that can fill the void left by their missing homeland.

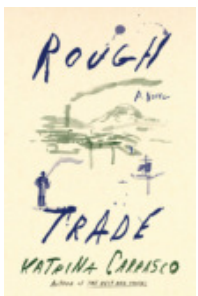
Some readers will bristle at "This Strange Eventful History" and the pains it takes to account for the lost sense of belonging felt by the *pieds noirs*, who treated Algerians like strangers in their own land. One could accuse Messud of treating her family's history like a family heirloom, which is to say, over-delicately. Messud is fond of quoting a piece of advice from the Russian writer Anton Chekhov. In 2020, she summarized it for the Web site Literary Hub, saying, "It's not my job to tell you that horse thieves are bad people, it's my job to tell you what this horse thief is like." Messud risks the accusations above to do her work well. In "This Strange Eventful History," she unswervingly tells us what the *pieds noirs* are like—a people too homeless to feel responsible for squatting, too poor to see themselves as colonizers, too in love with their conquest to sense anything wrong with the liaison. The Cassars cling to an idealized memory of Algeria that's untroubled by reality, the tree of knowledge unshaken, the apple still intact, but Messud trusts her readers to bite down. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



Shakespeare's Sisters, *by Ramie Targoff (Knopf)*. In this thoughtful study, Targoff, a literary scholar, highlights four female contemporaries of Shakespeare, women who "weren't encouraged" and rarely received "even a shred of acclaim," but managed to write nonetheless. Mary Sidney (the sister of the poet Sir Philip Sidney) produced a noteworthy translation of the Book of Psalms. Elizabeth Cary wrote "The Tragedy of Mariam," the first original play published by a woman in England. Aemilia Lanyer was the first published English female poet of the seventeenth century, thanks to her "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum," which mounted a "defense of women's rights." Anne Clifford, a voracious reader born to aristocrats, wrote a detailed journal; by "treating herself as a historical subject living an important life," Targoff argues, she became the "most important female diarist" of her time.

Limitarianism, *by Ingrid Robeyns (Astra)*. This provocative consideration of extreme wealth accumulation asks how society might improve if the phenomenon were eliminated. Robeyns, a philosopher, uses the term "limitarianism" to describe an economic framework that would impose a cap on how much money any single individual can amass. Throughout the book, she outlines the concrete steps that her proposal would require, and reflects on its wider social implications, in the form of sweeping fiscal and ethical transformations. Ultimately, her account amounts to an argument for "why a world without extreme wealth concentration is better for us all."



Rough Trade, *by Katrina Carrasco (MCD x FSG)*. The protagonist of this transgressive crime thriller, set in Tacoma, Washington, in the late nineteenth century, is Alma Rosales, an ex-detective who has constructed a new life as Jack Camp, a stevedore and an opium smuggler both beloved and feared by his crew. Alma commands this masculine world with "hard-worn knuckles and small-man's swagger," but when an old friend and love interest unexpectedly arrives, with a detective on her tail, their meeting sets off a series of dangers that almost cost Alma and her crew their livelihoods. At once richly atmospheric and finely paced, the novel is a potent and morally complex portrait of queer life and history.

Leaving, *by Roxana Robinson (Norton)*. This quietly compelling novel of forbidden love focusses on two characters in their sixties, Sarah (divorced) and Warren (married, not entirely happily), who dated as teen-agers and meet again by chance one evening at a performance of "Tosca." Though its tone is muted, the book captures the aching pull of an all-consuming affair, which draws the characters away from their families and from the lives they have painstakingly built. Robinson examines the question of how difficult it is to abandon vows, even for people who came of age in the throes of the sexual revolution. Despite contemporary society's general acceptance of divorce, the novel shows how desire can still have painful consequences.

POP MUSIC

PURE PLEASURE

The "Radical Optimism" of Dua Lipa.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Dua Lipa makes music that is not hard to enjoy the first time you hear it.

Recently, some of the world's biggest pop stars have been eschewing bangers in favor of a more postmodern, self-referential approach to the form. I don't necessarily mind the idea of personal mythology being central to unpacking an album's themes (it keeps me employed, after all), but the immediacy and the broad appeal of pop music have always felt crucial to its pleasure. The twenty-eight-year-old singer Dua Lipa, who was born in London to Kosovo Albanian parents, appears to instinctively understand the utility of pop as escapist fantasy. Lipa's new album, "Radical Optimism," does not require its listeners to know anything about Lipa, or her constellation of associates, or her cultural history, or her relationship to the past; it doesn't require knowing anything about anything, really, except how cleansing and ecstatic it can feel to move your body with brainless abandon.

Lipa is not alone on this journey—Sabrina Carpenter, Tate McRae, and Troye Sivan are all working in similar modes—but she might be our most reliable performer of astute, frictionless pop. (Lipa, of course, owes a debt to her predecessors, including Kylie Minogue, Madonna, and Britney Spears.) She seems fully committed to pop as a genre with boundaries (short songs, big hooks, broadly adaptable lyrics). That could be why she was tasked with opening the Grammys telecast this year, performing a medley of tracks from "Radical Optimism." This is not hard music to enjoy the first time you hear it.

During the past seven years, Lipa has grown as a dancer and a performer—in the video for her first big single, "New Rules," from 2017, she moved in such a relaxed way that it was occasionally giving "Weekend at Bernie's"—and, though she is more magnetic and practiced now, she still exudes a kind of detached coolness, as if she could take it or leave it. Lipa has legions of dedicated followers (particularly on Instagram, where she is often pictured looking hot and holding a book), but I have wondered, at times, if this is why she has not cultivated a frothing, hysterical fan community: there's just something gloriously untouchable about her. Her apparent needlessness can seem aspirational to anyone in the throes of too much feeling. "I don't wanna stay till the lights come on / I just can't relate to the words of this love song," she sings on "French Exit," a new song. On "Anything for Love," a piano ballad that transforms into a twitchy synth-pop tune, she sings about how prone she is to just getting over it already: "And I'm not interested in a love that gives up so easily / I want a love that's set on keeping me."

Lately, technology has made parsing the individual instrumental components of pop songs (especially pop songs intended for the dance floor, and augmented by various synthesizers, unnamed plug-ins, and effects) something of a farce. The tracks on "Radical Optimism" contain drums, bass, keyboards, guitars, and percussion; I know this mostly because I read the credits. The instrumentation on the album is a gleaming and impenetrable expanse, and the main attraction is Lipa, whose voice is strong and occasionally throaty. If poptimism—a critical philosophy that boils down to the idea that if something hits a wide target it's inherently worthwhile—has taught us anything, it's that doing this work well is incredibly difficult. Much of "Radical Optimism" was co-written by Lipa, Danny L Harle, Tobias Jesso, Jr., Caroline Ailin, and Kevin Parker, an Australian musician and producer who also makes dreamy, swirling psych-pop as Tame Impala. (Parker

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMONE NORONHA

proved his mainstream bona fides in the twenty-tens. In 2016, Rihanna covered his song "New Person, Same Old Mistakes" on her album "Anti"; Parker also co-wrote and co-produced "Perfect Illusion," the lead single from Lady Gaga's "Joanne.") He helps bring a warm and vaguely blitzed nineteen-seventies feel to Lipa's record—a little bit "Saturday Night Fever," a little bit Quincy Jones, somewhere between Chic's "Le Freak" and Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough."

I particularly hear the influence of Parker on the chorus of the single "Houdini," right as the backing vocals pipe up. (I also hear him literally; he's listed as a background singer.) It's one of my favorite moments on the album. "Maybe you can get a girl to change," Lipa sings, her voice sharp, clear, more than a little doubting. ("Her ways!" Lipa adds.) If "Radical Optimism" has a central theme, it's independence, or, more specifically, an unwillingness to engage in the sort of romantic tomfoolery we have devised cutesy names for (love bombing, gaslighting, ghosting). The idea is to come correct or go away. Lipa does not have time for pining or equivocation (she once told Jimmy Kimmel that she regularly slots even the most rote or pleasurable tasks—showering, watching "Succession"—into her daily schedule), and, constitutionally, she's the opposite of a maybe-I-can-fix-him type. Why bother? She's fine rolling her eyes until a proper partner comes along. "Are you somebody who can go there? / 'Cause I don't wanna have to show ya," she sings on "Training Season," a pulsing song about not having the patience to teach someone how to treat her. That idea is at the center of "Houdini," too:

> I come and I go
> Prove you got the right to please me
> Everybody knows
> Catch me or I go Houdini

It could be that my brain has simply been liquefied by modern life, but I hear a hint of the rapper and teenage felon Bhad Bhabie in Lipa's slurred articulation of "catch me." (In 2016, on an episode of "Dr. Phil," Bhad Bhabie—who was there to discuss her habit of stealing cars—reacted to the audience's laughter by sneering "Cash me ousside, howbow dah?," a catchphrase that quickly went viral and later got remixed into a single.) The evocation of Houdini in this particular context also makes me snicker. I can't stop picturing a short, narrow-eyed Hungarian man wearing a turn-of-the-century bathing costume and chains, an image fundamentally at odds with Lipa, who is famously lithe and gorgeous. This, I think, is what ends up getting lost in more narratively ambitious pop music—a sense of playfulness, the idea that art can be important but also low stakes, sophisticated but easy to feel, artfully rendered but intent on delight.

In 2019, I interviewed Lipa for The New Yorker Festival. My father's family is Balkan, and I had recently spent some time in the Accursed Mountains of northern Albania, not far from Pristina, the city where Lipa's parents lived before they left Kosovo for the U.K. (By 1998, the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were at war; Lipa's family returned home in 2008, after Kosovo declared independence.) I was curious how the conflict had shaped her. Lipa moved back to England on her own, at fifteen, to pursue a career in music. "I jump at the chance to tell people that I'm from Kosovo," she told me. "I'm really, really proud of my roots."

Lipa said that for "Radical Optimism" she was influenced by Britpop. She name-checked Oasis, Primal Scream, and Massive Attack, though the presence of those artists (and of Britpop more generally) is far more spiritual than musical; she told *Variety* that she was attracted to the sense of "real freedom" she felt in their work. For anyone who has witnessed or experienced grief on a large scale, freedom can sometimes be tangled up with the idea of asylum. Lipa has been clear about how a good pop song can help a person to get lost in a moment, to briefly but truly unburden herself. Pop music—the mesmeric choruses, the repetition, the propulsive beats—is mantra-like by design. Listen long enough and the contours of a difficult day start to blur. Problems seem smaller. Happiness feels closer, more possible. When pop is practiced well, the end result is something like transcendence. ♦

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THE THEATRE

MOTHERS OF US ALL

Paula Vogel's "Mother Play," Shaina Taub's "Suffs," and Amy Herzog's "Mary Jane."

BY HELEN SHAW

Classic American drama is haunted by monstrous mothers. Vain, vampiric mamas prowl through plays from Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie" to Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night," from Edward Albee's "Three Tall Women" to Sam Shepard's "Buried Child." For those guys, mothers are either harpies or sirens—villains or traps. Yet, suddenly, this season we're surrounded by richly human mothers, each with a compassionately observed interiority. (It's maybe not a coincidence that 2024 has been a bumper year for women's writing on Broadway.) In fact, Paula Vogel's "Mother Play," Shaina Taub's musical "Suffs," and Amy Herzog's "Mary Jane" all happen to contain a long moment during which we are invited to simply sit and study a woman's face. In a world where we don't fear mothers as Medusas, perhaps we'll choose to look at them forever.

In the autofictional "Mother Play," at Second Stage's Hayes Theatre, Celia Keenan-Bolger stars as Martha, a lightly disguised version of Vogel, and Jim Parsons portrays a version of the playwright's brother Carl, who died of complications from AIDS in 1988. The play, which begins by flashing back to the early sixties, follows Martha and Carl for four decades as they deal with their hard-drinking, self-regarding single mom, Phyllis, played with a wonderful, lurching grace by Jessica Lange. Vogel's work is subtitled "A Play in Five Evictions," referring both to Phyllis's struggle to keep her family housed in tenement apartments—the projection designer Shawn Duan puts images of scuttling cockroaches on fridges and trash cans—and to her vicious expulsion of sweet, bookish Carl after he tells her that he's been sleeping with men.

If Vogel had ended her play there, with Phyllis shouting, "You have five minutes to pack up and get out," then "Mother Play" would be another monster drama. Instead, Vogel tracks Phyllis's strange, magnetic effect on her children and theirs on her. A lovely, if fleeting, rapprochement comes in 1978, when Martha coaxes her mother out to a gay club with her and Carl and then the family dances together. Tiny, pugnacious Keenan-Bolger plays Martha like a jackhammer, carrying the tension of her upbringing in her shoulders; Parsons fills up the space with huge looping gestures. Of the three actors, though, the only one who can actually get down on the dance floor is Lange. You learn a great deal about Phyllis's frustrations and capacities by watching her groove to "Disco Inferno."

Vogel herself exerts a parental force on contemporary American drama: her Pulitzer Prize-winning "How I Learned to Drive," from 1997, became a template for the postmodern memory play, in which whimsical touches counterbalance instances of cruelty. (A Broadway revival in 2022 was a reminder of its astonishing power.) Here, she returns to those earlier formal innovations, though she seems far less confident in her pacing: the fanciful elements, like an interlude in which the cockroaches tap-dance, aren't well integrated, and the climax relies heavily on the poignancy of Phyllis, in a wheelchair, unable to remember her son's passing. (Dementia is a surefire way to make your audience weep.) I was far more affected by a long, wordless sequence in which Phyllis, bored, tries to fill the time after her children are gone. In the script, Vogel scores what she calls the Phyllis Ballet: there should be booze, a microwaved meal, Muzak on the radio. But the director Tina Landau and Lange have added an unscripted gesture. As Phyllis wanders about, she tucks a flower briefly, tenderly, under her chin. In the next scene, touch-averse Phyllis places Martha's hand in the same hollow. Phyllis can be devastatingly awful, but this

Jessica Lange, Jim Parsons, and Celia Keenan-Bolger star in Vogel's latest.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

little grace note shows us how much her daughter—so sure that she's unloved—has actually been on her mother's mind.

The steadiness of a woman's attention is also the prime mover in "Suffs," a galvanizing musical written and composed by Shaina Taub, about the fight for women's suffrage in the first decades of the twentieth century. Taub stars as Alice Paul, a novice activist willing to challenge veteran movement leaders such as Carrie Chapman Catt (Jenn Colella). "Let Mother vote!" Catt sings in a jingly Tin Pan Alley curtain-raiser, eager to make men comfortable with the idea of extending the franchise. But it's 1913, and Paul and other young suffragists aren't interested in such pandering: they march; sing anachronistic, grab-'em-by-the-misogynist-slur anthems ("I'd rather be right than rich / cuz I'm a great American bitch"); and rally behind the activist Inez Milholland (Hannah Cruz), who dresses as a warrior queen while riding a white palfrey at the head of their processions. Rather less jauntily, they burn President Woodrow Wilson in effigy—there are no men in the cast, and the character is played by Grace McLean in drag—and endure imprisonment, hunger strikes, and force-feedings. The torture is kept offstage, communicated mainly by letter from Paul to her suffs, and, as Taub sings, McLean's dreamy voice forms a menacing counterpoint. "Ladies must be protected," the buffoonish Wilson warbles, swaying on the balls of his feet like Fred Astaire.

Catt may use the popular conception of the Mother as cozy reassurance, but the musical, directed by Leigh Silverman, understands another key aspect of motherhood—the sometimes productive friction inherent in passing knowledge from one generation to the next. We see this when Ida B. Wells (Nikki M. James) and the older Mary Church Terrell (Anastaćia McCleskey) disagree about how to call the white women of the movement to account for marginalizing Black marchers, and when Catt recommends caution to Paul, and the younger crusader inevitably rebels. In the musical's closing moments, Taub shows us the activists who will come after Paul—the work is never-ending. Earlier in the show, at intermission, we see an immense photograph of the real Milholland, in full regalia; she died, of anemia, during the campaign for the Nineteenth Amendment. Like Paul, Milholland didn't have children, but these are Founding Mothers all the same.

Motherhood in Amy Herzog's exquisite "Mary Jane," now at the Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman, has been distilled to an almost unbearable degree. We never actually see Mary Jane (Rachel McAdams, still a bit hesitant onstage) hold her son, Alex. The toddler is so medically burdened that he requires around-the-clock care, and for the long first section of the play (directed by Anne Kauffman) he's out of sight in his bedroom; we register his presence only by the beeping of his breathing apparatus. The building's superintendent (the terrific Brenda Wehle) wants to put grates on the windows, but Alex will never walk or reach up to a window—he'll never be endangered by a fall. He's "my little prince," a kind-hearted home health aide (April Matthis) says, which makes us think of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's child monarch, in space, ruling a kingdom in a vacuum.

After the first act, we don't hear anyone call Mary Jane by her name. By the time Alex goes to the hospital, the women helping her are addressing her only as Mom. A doctor (Matthis again), a Buddhist chaplain (Wehle again), and others speak in bracing, honest terms while also supporting Mary Jane as she cares for her son, and tries to maintain her optimism. Herzog has spoken about the story stemming in part from crushing personal experience, which you hear in the play's technical specificity and in its tone of bright anguish. The production's spiritual aspects—Mary's name; Alex as the peaceful prince, whose body she bathes and tends; the way the set designer Lael Jellinek has the apartment set fly out but then hover, angelically, above the white hospital blankness—are almost invisible behind the text's welter of worldly detail. At the end, though, as Mary Jane tells the chaplain about the auras of an oncoming migraine, the play focusses all of its light on her face, and Mary Jane turns into something like a medieval icon of the Virgin. The theatrical background is gone; even dimension disappears in the tight spotlight. Mary Jane has been rarefied just to her suffering and her love—and, of course, to the way she shines. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

STUNTED

"The Fall Guy."

BY RICHARD BRODY

In the art of filmmaking, there's a special place for movies by directors who know whereof they film. When a baseball movie is made by a former professional baseball player—for instance, Ron Shelton's "Bull Durham" (1988)—or when, as with Oliver Stone's "Platoon" (1986), a Vietnam War movie is made by a decorated and twice-wounded veteran of that war, there's an implied assurance of something deeper than just research. The assurance is of a personal stake, of having the story in one's blood, and maybe vice versa. Such movies fit within a larger genre, what one could call the lid-lifter—fact-based fictions that offer behind-the-scenes glimpses into realms that are usually inaccessible. Ava DuVernay's "Origin" (2023) reveals how a nonfiction writer goes about her research; David Fincher's "The Social Network" (2010) shines a light on the hectic maneuvering of the tech-startup scene. Another subset of this larger genre is the movie-business movie: Robert Altman's "The Player" (1992), say, or Robert Townsend's "Hollywood Shuffle" (1987). These films have an extra layer of built-in reflexivity: set in a world that the directors inherently know, they go behind their own scenes, via sly allusions and bold metafictions.

"The Fall Guy" fits snugly into all of these categories. A playful action-comedy about a stuntman, it's directed by David Leitch, a longtime stuntman and stunt coördinator whose career as a director (which started with "John Wick") revolves around action films. It's loosely based on a nineteen-eighties TV series of the same title, in which Lee Majors played an underemployed stuntman named Colt Seavers, who moonlighted as a bounty hunter. But in the new movie, written by Drew Pearce, Colt Seavers (Ryan Gosling) needs no side gig. He's been working for years as the stunt double of one of Hollywood's biggest stars, Tom Ryder (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), who consistently proclaims to the press (and even to colleagues who know better) that he does all his own stunts. Regardless of any disclaimers about resemblances being purely coincidental, it's pretty obvious who Tom is meant to satirize.

Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt star in David Leitch's film.

On a shoot with Tom, Colt embarks on a romance with a camera operator, Jody Moreno (Emily Blunt). After a jump from high up in a building's atrium goes badly wrong, a long recovery ensues during which he turns his back on the business, and on Jody. Eighteen months later, he gets a call from Tom's producer, Gail Meyer (Hannah Waddingham). She offers him a job on a new film directed by Jody, who is finally getting her big break. Yet, after arriving at the shoot, in Australia, Colt finds Jody far from welcoming, embittered by what she took as his rejection of her. He also gets a secret assignment from Gail: Tom has disappeared, and she needs Colt to locate him, and quickly. If the studio discovers its star is missing, it will pull the plug on the movie, jeopardizing Jody's directorial career. Colt soon comes across a corpse and learns that he's the prime suspect in a murder case. So he strives to find Tom for Jody's sake, and to catch the actual killers for his own sake—and, of course, in the process, to regain Jody's trust and love.

The story of "The Fall Guy" is even more closely linked to the idiosyncrasies of film shoots than that other recent movie about an actor and his stunt double, Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood" (2019), in which myths overwhelm realities. Tarantino's counterfactual ingenuity in linking the two fictional performers to the real-life story of the Manson family was weighed down by the sediment of movie-world references, which seemed mostly designed to gratify his swoony fascination with cinematic history and his own place in it. Leitch, who doubled Brad Pitt for three years, keeps the action focussed on the events at hand, liberally adorning it with insider details. The first stunt that Colt has to execute in Sydney is a cannon roll, in which a vehicle flies through the air and takes a tumble when landing. Leitch emphasizes Colt's assessment of the stunt site's physical conditions (the texture of the sand where he'll be driving), the producers' disregard for his safety-related doubts, the explosive hardware that makes the stunt possible, and the kinds of trouble that can result.

Once Colt dashes off to track down Tom—who is said to be involved with some "shady" people, including a drug dealer with a leopard-spot tattoo on his shaved head—his fanatical attention to detail turns out to have real-world ap-

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

plications, whether he's breaking through a hotel-room door when a key card proves recalcitrant or timing a roll down a hill to land on a moving vehicle. His skills at passing through flames and holding his breath underwater, his agility in evading swords and feigning gunplay all come in handy in actual fights for his life. When a pistol loaded with blanks shows up in the first act, you can bet that it will fool someone in the third.

Leitch is a pioneer in using digital technology to pre-visualize stunts, a technique that allows for a more aestheticized approach to filming them. In "The Fall Guy," as in his other features, images are crafted to frame the action in cleverly eye-catching ways (if only for fractions of seconds), and even comic and romantic banter has the suspense of action brewing just beneath the surface. Leitch knows where the explosives are buried and when they're going to go off, and the looming likelihood of physical feats lends every interaction a restless urgency.

For all the movie's kinetic thrills, "The Fall Guy" is a romantic comedy, and it succeeds in delivering that genre's patterned gratifications in a fashion that does more than reheat them. The story is held together by the force of attraction that binds Colt and Jody even as circumstances conspire to keep them apart, and Leitch finds witty methods of heightening both the attraction and the distance. Early on, before the fateful atrium jump, the couple keeps up their playful love talk on a busy set by murmuring spicy nothings to each other on their walkie-talkies. Later, when they are discussing some revisions to Jody's movie over the phone, Colt suggests using a split screen, and Leitch immediately switches to split screen for the rest of the call—a rom-com trick made famous in the Rock Hudson–Doris Day vehicle "Pillow Talk" (1959) which brings to the fore the sympathetic similarities of their gestures and postures. While preparing for a battle scene in which Colt gets set on fire, the pair have an argument via megaphones; ostensibly a technical consultation, the conversation lets Jody air a litany of grievances and humiliate Colt in front of the assembled cast and crew.

As a movie that takes place in the world of movies, "The Fall Guy" displays a palpable joy in craft, revelling in the deftness of its comedy, the inventiveness of its stunts, and a generous sprinkling of Easter eggs. Leitch's self-referential mode has none of Tarantino's portentous mythologizing, but it's also true that Tarantino's approach does at least present a Hollywood that is connected to politics and history. Such matters don't play to Leitch's strengths, as shown by his Cold War spy thriller, "Atomic Blonde" (2017), in which the sensory excitement of choreographed action obscured any sense of historical moment. With "The Fall Guy," he's back in his comfort zone, but the movie suffers from a thinness of personal backstory. The characters exhibit no traits that aren't required by the plot, and even some of those are left vague. (Does Colt have a martial-arts background? A military one? Or are all good fake fighters also good in real fights?) Colt's leading trait is his desire for a cup of coffee—and Leitch delights in his many ways of frustrating Colt's desire so that, whenever the stuntman gets near a cup, it signals trouble ahead.

As winning and vigorous as Gosling and Blunt are, Leitch gives them little leeway. Dialogue scenes are as tightly plotted as the stunts, leaving no room for chemistry to develop. Failing to unleash the actors' resourcefulness, the movie seems merely to capture their faces and voices, as if Leitch used digital pre-visualization for the story's romance. Any warmth is undercut by the chilly efficiency of an equation being solved. As the movie presses to its climax, virtuosic action sequences astonish as they are meant to, but they render the inevitable happy ending anticlimactic.

To be fair, the effacement of character is itself one of Leitch's dramatic points. Colt and Jody, along with the skilled crew working with them—including the stunt coördinator, Dan Tucker (Winston Duke), and a technician named Venti Kushner (Zara Michales)—embody another kind of Hollywood myth, one in which people arrive from nowhere and leave all personal baggage behind in the service of exacting professionalism. By contrast with these team players, the needy star Tom and his manager, Gail, are odious with self-centered swagger. Tom compares his value in the national economy with the insignificance of an instantly replaceable stuntman. When Colt derides the "nihilism" of Gail's blockbusters, she describes their entertainment value as "sexy bacon," wrapped around a nutritious message in order to get dogs to eat it. Colt calls her out for likening viewers to dogs, but, for Leitch, the bacon is the message. ♦

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VOLUME C, NO. 12, May 13, 2024. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue's cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue and international; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Nick Hotchkin, chief financial officer; Stan Duncan, chief people officer; Danielle Carrig, chief communications officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lonnie Millsap, must be received by Sunday, May 12th. The finalists in the April 22nd & 29th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 27th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

.....

THE FINALISTS

"Ever since I can remember, paintings of children have given me nightmares."
Glen Reiser, Camarillo, Calif.

"I know a fake smile when I see one."
Peter Dudley, Eugene, Ore.

"You throw a pie, it's a joke. You throw paint, it's art."
Laura Lind, Pittsburgh, Pa.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"No bedtime story until you clean up that mess you made downtown."
Paul Benedetto, Guelph, Ont.

THE NEW YORKER

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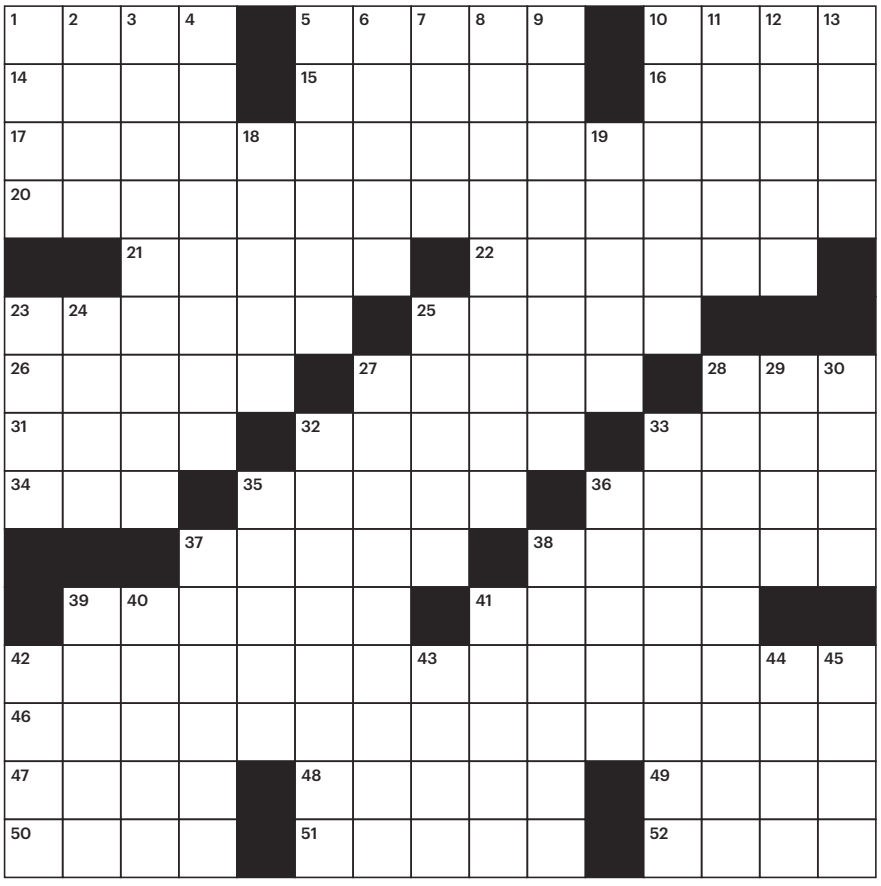
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY



ACROSS

1 Cry inconsolably
5 Frequent subject of protests in the sixties and seventies
10 Requester of "As Time Goes By" at Rick's Café
14 Zoom-call annoyance
15 Japanese camera brand
16 It's not seen when it's new
17 "Hey, remember who you're dealing with here!"
20 N.F.L. team whose fans are known as the 12s
21 Bohr played by Kenneth Branagh in "Oppenheimer"
22 Distress signals
23 In the future
25 Research-funding source
26 Portioned (out)
27 Surname in an Edith Wharton title
28 Jellicle Ball attendee, in a Broadway classic
31 Fish that are leaf-shaped prior to metamorphosis
32 Mars on the charts
33 Attention to detail
34 Roguish
35 David ___ (Ricky Gervais's role on "The Office")
36 Political housecleaning
37 Force out of bed
38 ___ of honor (member of a wedding party, perhaps)
39 Soviet counterintelligence org. featured in James Bond novels
41 Industry-speak
42 1984 comedy with an IMDb rating out of eleven stars instead of the usual ten
46 Words to end a court battle?
47 Seller of flat packs
48 Bank structure
49 Disgruntled
50 Love or gab follower
51 Fail to save
52 Shoot out

DOWN

1 Good Queen ___ (nickname of a Tudor monarch)
2 Ice pack's target
3 "Slow down there!"
4 Castle-building opportunities, maybe
5 In a humorous way
6 LeAnn who had her first *Billboard* Hot 100 hit at age fifteen
7 Pair in the dead man's hand
8 Vanguard
9 San Antonio attraction
10 Share, as knowledge
11 "Brigadoon" and "Camelot" composer Frederick
12 Clothing items that may be no-show
13 Workers not welcome in the kitchen?
18 Place
19 Oscar-nominated 1953 Western
23 Poetic paeans
24 Coward of the theatre
25 Surly response
27 PrettyLitter alternative
28 Redhead, slangily
29 Ship that safely passed through the Clashing Rocks, in myth
30 Many a Disney Channel star
32 European capital where NATO is headquartered
33 Material for Waterford vases
35 Spassky who lost to Bobby Fischer in chess's Match of the Century
36 First airline to use 747s for commercial flights
37 Usher elsewhere
38 Wasn't happy with
39 Extend a paw at obedience school
40 Users of imaginary props
41 ___ closet
42 End-of-week business letters?
43 Cover a lot
44 Real-estate measure
45 "I'm glad that's over!"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

C	R	I	M	P	■	P	S	T	■	A	D	A	G	E
H	A	N	O	I	■	A	H	H	■	D	E	B	R	A
A	N	D	R	E	■	R	O	E	■	O	S	C	A	R
A	C	R	E	■	I	T	R	Y	■	R	I	S	E	N
T	H	A	T	S	M	Y	T	H	I	N	G	■	■	■
■	■	■	H	A	S	B	E	E	N	■	N	I	C	K
I	T	S	A	B	L	U	R	■	S	P	E	N	C	E
B	O	O	N	I	E	S	■	S	P	U	R	N	E	D
U	R	B	A	N	E	■	S	O	A	P	S	U	D	S
S	E	A	L	■	P	L	A	U	D	I	T	■	■	■
■	■	■	I	F	Y	O	U	R	E	L	U	C	K	Y
P	L	A	T	O	■	O	D	E	S	■	B	O	N	E
H	O	W	T	O	■	F	A	D	■	I	B	R	A	M
D	R	O	L	L	■	A	D	O	■	C	L	A	V	E
S	E	L	E	S	■	H	E	N	■	H	E	L	E	N

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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